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THIS important book, after touching upon the situation in the Middle East at the outbreak of war, proceeds to show the disastrous effects of the collapse of France on the British position in that theatre. It then deals with a number of stirring events: the Italian invasion of Egypt and Greece; the German occupation of Rumania; the splendid counter-attack of the Greeks; the battle of Taranto; and the whole series of General Wavell's victories in Egypt, Libya and Abyssinia.

It is written by a well-known soldier who is also a recognised authority on eastern affairs.

It makes a special study of Wavell's strategy, and inspired leadership, and it shows the fine spirit of unity prevailing among the Imperial forces engaged and the splendid co-operation displayed by the three fighting forces.



GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL.

# WAVELL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*by*

Major-General  
H. ROWAN-ROBINSON

C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

*With 63 Illustrations  
And 4 Maps*

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It was originally intended to complete this book on the 20th of March, then came the strikingly favourable events that occurred on and about the 27th of March—in Yugoslavia, in East Africa and at Cape Matapan. A postscript was therefore added, so as to finish on a happy note. Hardly; however, was the ink of the addition dry when there started a whole series of reverses—in Libya, in Greece and Iraq. So sudden and calamitous was the change and so completely did present misfortune appear to blot out past fortune, that it was decided, at first, to abandon publication.

Later, however, events were seen in a truer perspective. It was realized that war consists in a series of ups and downs, of successes and failures, and that any contemporary record of a period of warfare must accept that fact.

But, while publication was held up, history was not standing still. It was in fact marching with giant strides. It was therefore decided to cancel such parts of the narrative as had lost interest and, with the addition of two short chapters, to bring the book up to date and publish it.

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## P R E F A C E

**T**H E R E I S C O N S I D E R A B L E D O U B T I N men's minds as to what constitutes the Near East and what the Middle East. In general, the former term is applied to the countries of south-eastern Europe—mainly to the Balkans, and the latter to the countries east and south of the eastern Mediterranean, namely, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Libya with extensions to Iraq, Iran, the Sudan, and Abyssinia. This nomenclature, though somewhat erroneous, will be adhered to in the following pages.

It is with campaigns in these two groups of countries that it is intended to deal, main stress being laid on operations in which British forces have played the leading part.

It is too early, of course, to write any authoritative account of recent events in these theatres ; for many of the details, such as numbers and armaments, are still held secret ; and the military and political reasons on which decisions have been based are likely, except for those behind the scenes, to remain a matter of guesswork for some years to come.

Nevertheless, contemporary accounts written hot upon the tread of events, amid the rise and fall of hopes and fears, and coloured with the records of the recent personal experiences of participants, have now, as ever, a value in building up the more complete history of the future.

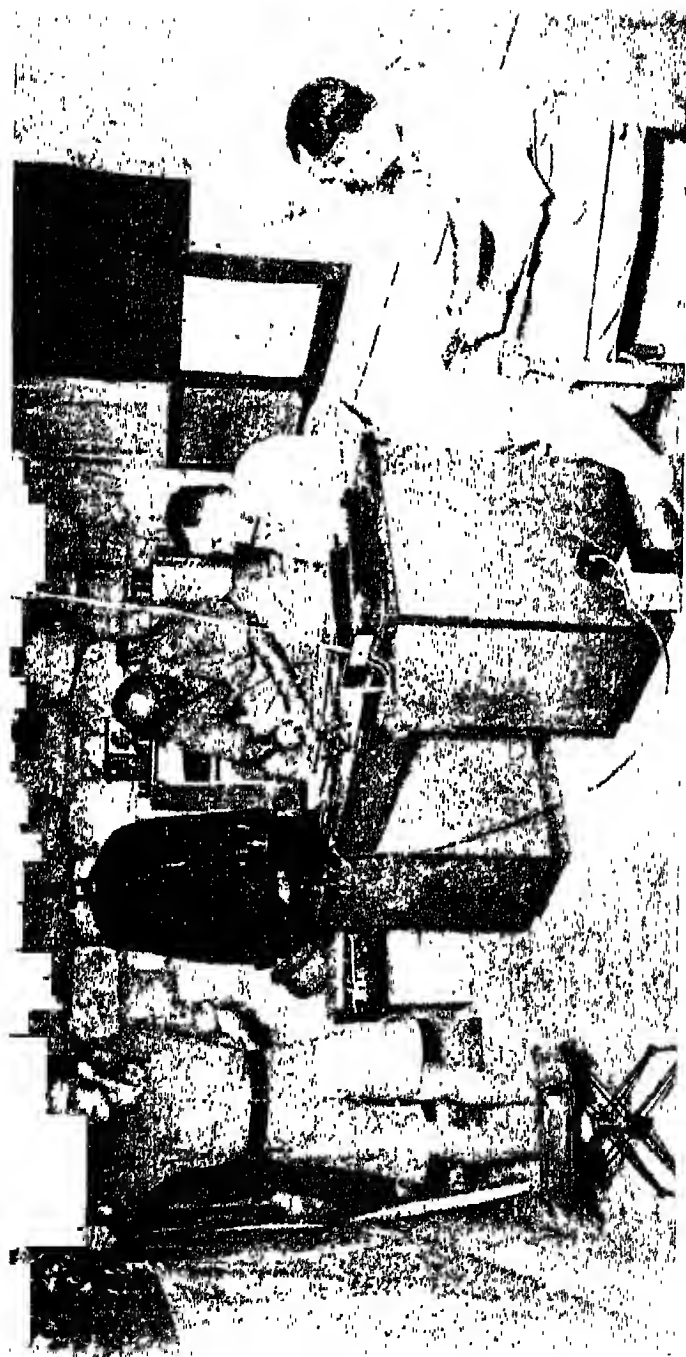
Never, perhaps, have writers received less official

aid than in these campaigns, in compiling their tales ; for the *communiqués* issued in the past few months from the various headquarters have been laconic to a quite exceptional degree. The official reporters have, to a great extent, allowed events in their march to speak for themselves ; and the trained observer has, therefore, had to fill up the blanks in his knowledge by careful study of the geography of the country and by following movements closely with scales and compasses on the indifferent maps available. The despatches of the war-correspondents have often been of deep interest and have helped greatly to paint the picture in the ensuing pages ; but they have naturally been limited in scope largely to the field of vision of their authors and have dealt rather with facts that came under the eye and with casual conversation with troops, than with purposes, plans, and the wider achievements. Some of the more valuable information obtained has been that given in the occasional talks, including a few from the Prime Minister himself, of well-briefed experts on the B.B.C. To all these sources the author is profoundly grateful.

AUSTRALIANS TRAINING IN EGYPT



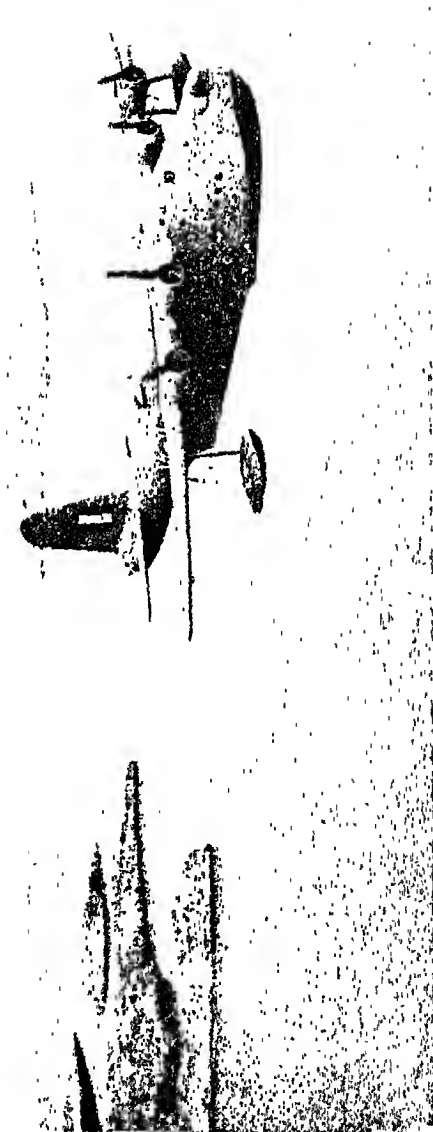




COMMAND POST IN DESERT DUG-OUT



ENTRANCE TO DUG-OUT



OVER GREEK ISLANDS—A SUNDERLAND FLYING-BOAT

## CHAPTER I

### THE SITUATION AT THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

WHEN GERMANY MADE HER SUDDEN and treacherous onslaught on Poland, thereby bringing Britain and France into the field against her, no immediate danger threatened the Middle East. Italy, with a vast army in Libya, furnished indeed a potential threat to France in Tunisia and to a Britain charged with the protection of Egypt; but she was, for the moment, neutral, and Germany was fully occupied, on the one hand, with the invasion of Poland and, on the other, with guarding her western frontier.

The possibility of a spread eastwards of Axis activities was, however, in all minds; and, in consequence, steps were early taken to strengthen the Allied position in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. In Syria, French Colonial troops were gradually assembled to the number of 100,000 to 120,000, and the British central reserve held, prior to the war, in Palestine and Egypt, was supplemented almost immediately by such units and formations as could be spared from India and, later, as soon as they had received sufficient training, by Australians and New Zealanders—the nucleus of a new Anzac Corps. By the end of the first nine months of war there were probably 180,000 Allied troops available—a force of high quality controlled by the redoubtable Weygand with Wavell in command of the British troops. It was a fine

team, inspiring confidence and capable of masterly action against any opponent likely in the near future to be encountered in the theatre to which it was assigned.

So much for the Allied armies. We may now turn to the countries of the Middle East in which it might be their fate to operate.

To the north of Syria lies Turkey, guardian of the straits separating Europe from Asia, and imposing, from the traditional courage of her soldiers and from the rugged and ill-roaded nature of her Asian highlands, a stout barrier to an enemy advance eastwards.

She was linked with France and the United Kingdom by the Tripartite Treaty of October, 1939, according to the terms of which, on the one hand, the two Western Powers were to go to her aid if she were assailed by a European Power or if she were involved in war through an act of aggression in the Mediterranean area against her or her friends ; and, on the other hand, she was to assist the Western Powers if the latter were engaged in hostilities on account of their guarantees to Rumania and Greece. If, for any reason, the two clauses quoted did not apply, consultation would take place and, at worst, Turkey would maintain a benevolent neutrality. An important stipulation provided that obligations under the treaty should not involve Turkey in war with Russia.

The Turkish army in 1939 numbered, at peace-strength, some 175,000 men with about 400 aeroplanes, and it could put a million men eventually into the field. Turkey was too poor to afford modern equipment by land, air or sea, and her normal poverty had been enhanced by a series of disastrous earthquakes. She has, however,

always suffered from a lack of means and has nevertheless managed, throughout the centuries, to maintain her high reputation as a military nation. The Anatolian peasant is, in fact, a natural soldier. Give him a rifle, a sack of cartridges, a spade and the minimum of food needed to keep body and soul together, and he will furnish the toughest of problems for an assailant, as we ourselves learnt on many a battlefield in the Great War.

Not only from the bravery of her soldiers, but also from her geographical position, Turkey could be of great value to the Allied cause. Holding the Dardanelles, she could admit Allied ships to the Black Sea and prevent the transport by sea of Russian and Rumanian oil to Italy and Germany. The obstacle formed by the Straits is reinforced by her mountain ranges which, pierced by few roads, present formidable barriers. Her position to a flank and the possession of Alexandretta closely threaten any advance through Syria on Nisibin and Mosul. Moreover, through the pact of Sa'adabad, she is in close touch with Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq and, through the last named of these Moslem Powers, with the Arabs of Arabia and of the Middle East in general who, for some years past, have been moving towards unity in a loose form of federation.

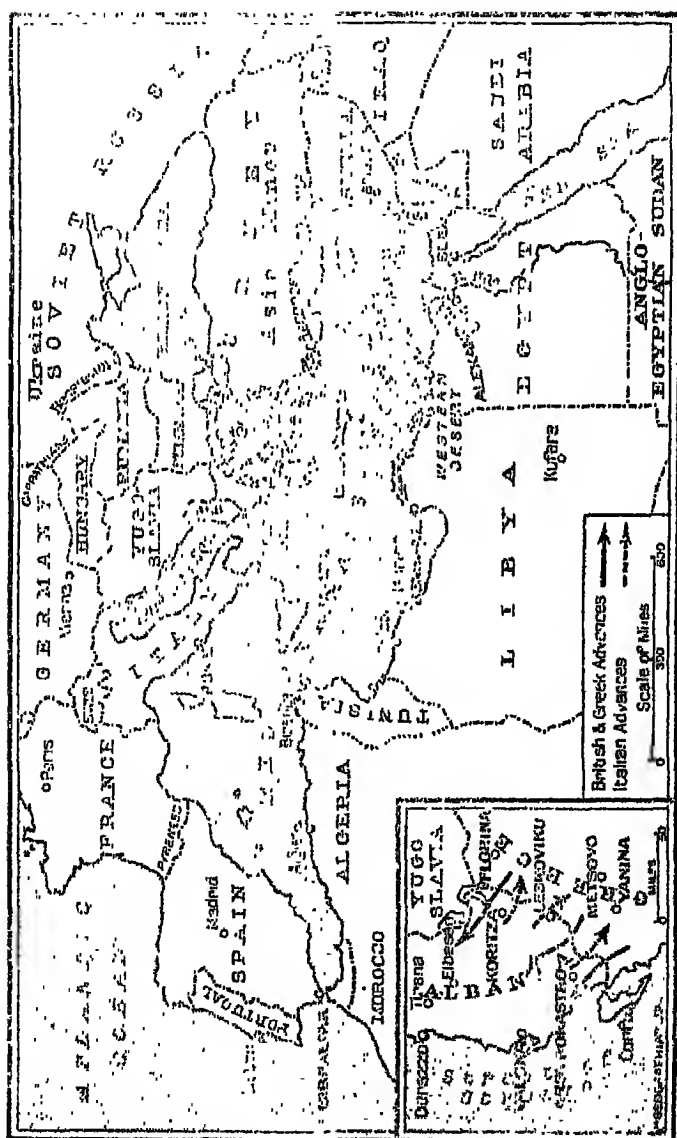
Her position in Europe, too, was of importance. She had made strenuous, but not very successful, efforts to create an anti-war block in the Balkans; she was connected by treaty to Russia; she had entered into intimate friendship with Greece, so recently her deadly enemy, and had established good neighbourly relations even with crotchety Bulgaria.

In neighbouring Syria, the political situation was

most complicated. It will be discussed later, when that country comes more into the picture. Militarily and geographically Syria is a key area. In 1939, she was one of an unbroken line of states between the Black Sea and the Bay of Sullum barring a movement from central and southern Europe towards India. From Aleppo, a railway runs by Nisibin to Baghdad and Basra. From Aleppo, too, starts the ancient route along the valley of the Euphrates to Iraq. From Tripoli, a rough motor-road follows the French fork of the pipe-line which conveys the oil of Kirkuk for 600 miles to the Mediterranean, and there are numerous tracks fit for motor-transport running eastwards from Damascus. In fact, all the easiest land-approaches from the Levant to the east debouch from Syria. They lead directly to the Mesopotamian and Persian oil-fields, whose immense resources could supply a successful invader with all the fuel needed for a further advance. Many conquerors, as is attested in stone on the rocks near Beirut, have set foot on the shore of Syria. The military importance which they attached to it has, of late years, been enhanced by the comparative ease with which mechanized forces could sweep over the deserts that lie east of it, and the use that can be made of it for aircraft as a springboard by which to leap over the desert. As conditions stood at the outbreak of war, however, its value could be exploited only by a Power with command of the Mediterranean or by one which has marched its armies along the northern or southern coasts of that sea.

Palestine, apart from its religious significance, is of importance as the corridor long tramped by multitudinous armies between Africa and Asia, the

# SITUATION AT OUTBREAK OF WAR 13





Nile and the Euphrates—in Axis dreams to be tramped once more as the road from Egypt to Damascus. In this Holy Land, we had been compelled for years to maintain a considerable army to keep internal dissension in check ; but the outbreak of war caused Jew and Arab, in their common detestation of Fascist and Nazi creeds, to bury the hatchet and to clamour for enlistment on the side of the Allies. That their bitter hatreds, in spite of years of German and Italian propaganda, were transformed in a trice into friendship, affords striking testimony to the loathing with which the dictators and their methods were regarded.

In Transjordan, our good friend, the Emir Abdullah, remained staunch and loyal as ever ; and, in Iraq, the Government at once implemented the terms of our treaty with them, gave British forces, by ground and air, all the facilities they needed and handed the German Minister his passports.

The friendship of the Arabs of Palestine, Iraq, and Transjordan is of particular moment in connection with the security of the pipe-line from Kirkuk to Haifa, which furnishes us with so much of our oil and which is highly vulnerable to sabotage. This friendship is also a precious link between the Moslems of North Africa and Arabia and our Moslem fellow-subjects in India.

Egypt had never really appreciated British rule in spite of the immense benefits she drew from it. She illustrated, in fact, the old adage that nations much prefer to rule themselves badly than to be ruled well by others. After showing herself for years inimical to any treaty that might lead to a permanent betterment of relations, she suddenly felt herself compelled, by the sudden and brilliant

success of Badoglio in Abyssinia, to seek protection in British arms and to give therefor a reasonable *quid pro quo*. Relations then improved considerably, and it became possible for the two Powers, acting in concert, to place Egypt on a sound defensive footing. A British Military Mission took seriously in hand the training of the Egyptian Army and managed to obtain for it a quantity of modern equipment from England, although at the time British troops were sadly lacking in that respect.

Nevertheless, on the outbreak of war, Egypt was, and remained, a doubtful factor. Italy had bought up a large part of the Press and used it unscrupulously to foster her plans. The wireless at Bari, ceaselessly seeking to foment ill-will against Britain, dropped its seed on ground not wholly barren. The large colony of Italians indoctrinated with Fascism, and to some extent regimented, was a hot-bed of anti-Ally intrigue and so a potential danger. Moreover, the threat, vague and questionable though it might be, which the Italian occupation of Abyssinia offered to Egypt's vital water-supply by the Blue Nile, combined with the gruesome tales of Graziani's cruelties to the Senussi in his conquest of Libya, made many Egyptians wonder anxiously if Britain was as strong as ever, or, as her enemies so frequently suggested, a decadent nation likely to fall a victim to the virile exponents of new and forceful doctrines. In the latter case, if Egypt were to be found fighting on the side of the Allies, how would she fare—a country rich, productive, possessed of baits such as Cairo, Alexandria, and the Suez Canal? The dictators had long made such matters clear. Intimidation was one of their favourite and most effective weapons and they were adepts at it.

In theory, Egypt stood by her treaty with Britain

which, by its terms, did not come into full operation until an aggressor crossed her borders. In practice, though the sympathies of the great majority of the people were strongly in favour of the Allies, she hoped, of course, like every other small nation (and not unnaturally), somehow or other to keep out of the war. The strength of her army has not been disclosed, but its numbers in September, 1939, were probably in the neighbourhood of 40,000.

Although Egypt seemed unlikely to shoulder the burden of war, her passive participation in preparation for defence since the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1936 had been of considerable value. Strategic communications, especially by road, had been greatly improved, and at Alexandria a fine naval base had been created.

In the Sudan, ruled jointly by Britain and Egypt, and bordering Libya on the one flank and Abyssinia on the other, there was a small army of British-trained Sudanese troops who have been long famous for their fighting powers. In Uganda and Kenya, close to the south-western and southern borders of Abyssinia, were a few battalions of the King's African Rifles recruited mainly from those colonies and possessing likewise a reputation for gallantry of long standing. South of the Libyan desert and west of the Sudan, French colonial territories stretch westwards to the Atlantic.

In the Mediterranean, the combined British and French fleets had complete command of the sea and were also fully equal, even granting a modicum of skill and daring on the part of the Fascist sailor, to dealing with the Italian fleet in the event of the *Duce* throwing in his lot with his brother dictator.

In the air, the situation, though not so favourable



FREE FRANCE MARCHES PAST



AUSTRALIANS ON THE MARCH

to the Allies as at sea, was fairly satisfactory ; for the French had a powerful air force based on Rayat—an excellent aerodrome lying between the two Lebanons ; and the British air force, though widely dispersed through Iraq, Aden, Palestine, and Egypt, and everywhere weak, could, owing to the flexibility, in favourable conditions, of the air weapon, be quickly concentrated at threatened areas from points as far distant as Basra and even, at a pinch, from India.

Such was the general situation in the Middle East at and shortly after the outbreak of war. Some of its factors, mainly those of a racial and geographical nature, would remain unaltered. Others were transient, being dependent on military and political developments in other theatres. It underwent no striking change during the succeeding nine months. The British Army was, however, continually reinforced by troops from India, Australia, and New Zealand and, under two leaders well known for their skill in training troops—Sir Archibald Wavell and Lieutenant-General Sir H. M. Wilson—underwent a thorough preparation for the stiff tasks that seemed likely to lie ahead of them.

## CHAPTER II

### EFFECT OF THE COLLAPSE OF FRANCE

ON THE 11TH OF JUNE, 1940, ITALY entered the war as the ally and the jackal of Germany. On the 25th of June hostilities ceased in France. German victory on the European continent was complete.

The effects on the situation in the Middle East of this double event were far-reaching and dangerous :

A. Domination of the Mediterranean by the Allied navies seemed likely to become a thing of the past. The strength of the British fleet in that sea had been calculated in expectance of co-operation with the French fleet and was now far below that of the Italian fleet. The latter, moreover, contained large numbers of light craft, surface and sub-surface, that seemed certain to render the transport of British reinforcements and supplies for the Middle East a perilous, if not impossible, undertaking.

B. The loss to the Allied cause of the French air squadrons in Syria and North Africa, and the entry into the battle of the *Regia Aeronautica*, completely changed the balance of power in the air. The Fascist fliers possessed a front-line strength estimated at 1,500 aircraft, and, with many world records and the honours of Abyssinia and Spain emblazoned on their wings, their inherent weakness was unsuspected. Their service to the strategy of the Axis not being required elsewhere than in the central

and eastern Mediterranean, they could develop in that theatre the maximum of power and thus be assured of an immense preponderance in numbers in an area where they already possessed every advantage of position.

Based on Sardinia, southern Italy and Sicily, they were well placed for an assault on our fleet and transports. In such action they would be practically unopposed, except by machines of the Fleet Air Arm which always suffer in comparison with land-aircraft owing to limitations due to restricted space, both of housing and take-off. On the borders of Libya, Italian aircraft would be within easy bombing reach of the Suez Canal and the naval base at Alexandria, both of them objectives of cardinal importance to the Empire. The short distances involved would enable them to concentrate at will, either in eastern Libya, in southern Italy, or in Albania. From the Dodecanese, the Italian bombers could strike our oil-refineries and our oil-tankers at Haifa and might also damage that excellent little harbour and the naval craft usually to be found there. On the other hand, British aircraft in the Middle East could find no objectives of comparable value either in Libya or elsewhere.

C. The entry of Italy and the exit of France had yet another adverse effect on our prospects in the Mediterranean. It deprived British aircraft of stepping-stones to Egypt in France and North Africa, and determined that our 'fighters,' at least, must travel there at a snail's pace packed on ship-board. At the same time, it afforded Germany a far wider scope for her aerial squadrons. In particular it might, provided the necessary preliminary preparations had been made, enable her



dive-bombers and air-borne troops to assist the Italians in an invasion of Egypt. In fact, by the change of conditions, flexibility, which is one of the greatest assets of aerial force, was, in the case of the R.A.F., largely reduced whereas, in that of the *Luftwaffe*, it was correspondingly increased.

D. On land, the defection of France left on the Levantine front a huge gap which might be exploited for an Axis advance eastward should Italy win command of the sea. It also deprived us of the fine leadership of Weygand and of the help of what had probably been the best French army in the field. Finally, it enabled Mussolini, instead of having to face both ways in Libya, to ignore his Tunisian front and to concentrate the bulk of his great army in that province towards Egypt. The relatively small British army, perhaps 70,000 strong, had thus not only to guard the vast territories of Egypt, the Sudan, and Palestine, but also to keep its eye skinned against an enemy invasion of Syria. Moreover, it was no longer able to work in close collaboration with Turkey; and the doubtful nature of the bridge connecting us with our potential ally would naturally cause the latter to exercise the utmost caution about entering the war.

E. Abyssinia would now play a part by sea, land, and air. From her modernized ports of Massawa and Assab, she flanked, at very short range, shipping in the Red Sea; and, at Mogadishu, she threatened the route round the Cape to India. Her army in Italian East Africa—whose estimated strength was 170,000 men—could strike south against Uganda and Kenya or west against Khartum and the Nile valley. Acting on interior lines, and disposing of overwhelming superiority, it might be expected to

take the initiative and, even if it launched no determined attack, might keep our weak and necessarily dispersed forces continuously and anxiously guessing. From Italian aerodromes aircraft could easily strike, on the one flank, at Aden and, on the other, at Khartum.

Seldom, if ever, in our history, except through direct defeat, has there been so sudden, and to all appearances, so catastrophic a transformation scene in a situation which had previously appeared eminently satisfactory. Certain it is that our position in the Middle East in the months of July and August was decidedly precarious and must have caused the gravest anxiety to the Government.

There were, however, some good features in it. In the first place, the nation, united in every sphere, was fighting alone ; and that is a tremendous asset. No longer was it necessary to pay attention to the susceptibilities, the waywardness and the special interests of Allies. In the second place, our front in the Levant was no flimsy façade. It could be solidly supported by India, Australia, and New Zealand, both with men and supplies. Moreover, away to the south, it was probable that the ' Springboks ' and the Rhodesians would come to our assistance in East Africa.

In the third place, the command of the oceans and their highways was ours and was likely to remain so. Supply could therefore be maintained ; for, even if the Mediterranean route were closed, the Cape route, much longer, indeed, but also much less susceptible to attack, would still be open.

Finally, though the point was not realized at the time, Hitler was not interested for the moment in the Middle East. He had handed over that sphere

to his brother dictator and was preparing to launch on Great Britain an immense onslaught which, he hoped, would prove decisive of the conflict and which would, for some months to come, absorb all his energies and all his aircraft.

## CHAPTER III

### ITALIAN INVASION

THE FIRST POINTS IN THE WAR-GAME in Africa went to the Italians. British Somaliland is an unproductive wilderness. As it flanks the movement of our ships eastwards, we retain it rather to keep other Powers from seizing it than from any desire to possess it ourselves. It was always held with a minimum garrison, consisting mainly of units of the Somaliland Camel Corps. During the war, it had been reinforced from India up to the point where it was thought that, in combination with the somewhat larger force of our Ally in French Somaliland, it would be strong enough to repel invasion. These calculations were completely upset by the collapse of France. The Italians saw their opportunity and invaded the country in three columns. The garrison put up a gallant defence, retired under no great pressure and embarked at Berbera under naval protection. The affair was of no great importance except as regards prestige. That exception, however, counted for much in the field of propaganda. The Axis Powers naturally stressed their success in glowing terms ; and, in the mind of the African native, amongst whom must be counted the inhabitants of Abyssinia whom we wished to incite to revolt, the evacuation was a definite defeat, however worthless the territory abandoned. The General Staff in India had foreseen danger to the Colony, and a year or more

beforehand had wished to prepare a much larger force to defend it ; but, at the last moment, Treasury sanction was unfortunately refused.

It was in the midst of the desperate battle over Britain that the Government took the daring step of despatching an 'immense convoy' through the Mediterranean with reinforcements and war material for the Navy, Army, and R.A.F. This decision to denude the Home front of many of its urgent requirements at the height of a critical struggle will surely be regarded by the historian as among the bravest and most far-reaching of the war. It was justified by results. Over Britain, in spite of the serious subtraction from their strength which the decision involved, our 'fighters' won their battle. In the Mediterranean, although a superior fleet and air force might have barred the way, and a hundred submarines and numerous flotillas of light craft might have crowded the narrow Sicilian channel, making of it a cemetery of our transports, yet in fact not a vessel was lost. The convoy, after dropping much-needed supplies and men in Malta, disembarked its precious cargo at Alexandria ; and, from that moment, the situation in the Middle East, though still far from comfortable, lost much of its peril. The opportunity of crushing British resistance in Egypt at a blow had passed.

On the 13th of September, 1940, Graziani began his long-heralded invasion of Egypt. His objective was Alexandria, which lies 300 miles from the Libyan frontier. Should he be able to capture and hold that capacious port, he would deny to Britain the only naval base at her disposal in the eastern Mediterranean equal to holding a battle-fleet. And the British navy would then, as Malta, under close

aerial assault from Sicily, was untenable as a naval base, have to confine its activities to the western Mediterranean, where it would be precariously based on Gibraltar and where it could exercise no influence over affairs in the Levant. German and Italian troops could then be transported freely to Africa with the result that the fate of Egypt, of the Suez Canal, and of all the gates to the East and to eastern oil, would be determined in their favour. Seldom in war has a geographical objective been so clearly defined and so rich in potential reward. There is, however, a gap to be bridged between the choice and the gain of an objective, and in this case it was wide and its passage fraught with many difficulties.

The eastern marches of Libya and the western marches of Egypt form a vast linked desert divided by an arbitrary line extending southwards from the coast for 700 miles. In this wild and desolate region, a few oases such as Giarabub, Kufra, and, Siwa alone relieve the dreary monotony of seas of sand and low scrub. Water is exceedingly scarce. There are no rivers in the land though, during the short spells of rainy weather, torrential showers, which occur mainly near the sea, may fill the *wadis* for a few hours. Solely along the coast, and then only by digging wells, is water for an army of any considerable strength to be found.

The distribution of water has always determined and fettered the strategy of desert warfare ; and, though mechanized forces, through their high carrying-capacity, have to some extent loosened the shackles, they are by no means free from them. It was thus probable that both armies, neither of them wholly mechanized, would for the most part be tied to a single road running close to the shore.

The implications of this factor for the invader were manifold. If the Italian fleet could obtain command of the sea, it could protect the left flank of the invading army, subject British communications to continual gunfire, and enfilade the successive positions the British army might assume. Moreover, the difficulty of supply along a single road would be largely eased by the ply of ships to each new port as it was captured. On the other hand, were Britain, as fortunately proved to be the case, to win the command of the sea, advantages of a cognate nature would be with the defender.

Again, were Italian fliers to achieve ascendancy in the air, they could bomb their enemy's bases and single line of communication, and thereby interfere greatly with the movements of his reinforcements and supplies. They might, too, interrupt his retreat and compel him to give battle under the grave drawback of facing both ways, by the process of dropping parachutists and other air-borne troops astride the single link with his base. Fortified by German troops landed from carrier-planes at the main centres of communications in Egypt—a country which, it must be remembered, possessed no Home Guard to deal with tactics of that nature—such action, synchronized with forceful frontal pressure, might well have proved decisive of the campaign. Again, fortunately, the boot was on the other foot, for the Royal Air Force and not the *Regia Aeronautica* was destined to win and maintain ascendancy. It could, indeed, carry out no spectacular landings of troops, for it did not possess the necessary machines, but it could, and did, assist the navy in keeping the coastal road, and hostile troops and transport on it, under continual fire.

It was possible that a highly mechanized army,

with a mobility much more pronounced than that of its adversary, might, by utilizing tracks away from the coast and moving by long bounds, have overcome the obstacles imposed by man and nature on the advance to Alexandria. Here again, however, the advantage was found to be not with the invader, as might have been expected, but with the invaded ; for the British army, though possibly not in the first days of the invasion, proved, rather surprisingly, to be more effectively mechanized than its opponent.

So much for the coastal road which was to exercise so great an influence on operations. There were other approaches to Egypt from the west, but they were all of minor importance. One hundred and sixty miles southwards within Libyan territory and connected to Bardia by a second-class road was the fortified oasis of Giarabub, whence a track fit for motor-transport ran east to the richly watered oasis of Siwa, where, in the Temple of Ammon, Alexander the Great had discovered that he was of divine origin, and where Mussolini, in the event of success, would no doubt make a similar discovery. From Siwa there were routes that led to the Nile valley and north-east to Mersa Matruh—a British entrenched position 170 miles west of Alexandria. These routes could carry light flanking or raiding detachments, but were not equal, owing to scarcity of water, to the operations of large forces. There were also tracks leading through the oasis of Kufra to the water-holes at Owenait, at the south-eastern corner of Libya, where it was possible that a light motorized detachment might attempt to strike across the Sudan in order to connect with an Italian movement from Eritrea or Abyssinia.

Operations along none of these tracks could, of



themselves, have exercised a decisive influence on events, partly because of the small scale to which they would have been limited, and partly because, except for a possible flanking movement from Siwa to Mersa Matruh, they could not have been combined, tactically or strategically, with the main advance along the coast.

Climate in Libya is an important factor. The summer is intensely hot and does not begin to cool until mid-September. That was a saving grace for the British army during its months of weakness—July and August. Where water is scarce and where an essential part of a force has to travel in tanks, shade-temperatures which rise above 120° Fahrenheit are almost unbearable. The conditions of summer warfare in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918, were of a similar nature, and they appeared to participants to test the limits of human endurance; but there, at least, water was plentiful and tanks were not in the picture.

By a curious coincidence, just when operations become possible in Libya, motorized movement becomes possible in the eastern Sudan because, with remarkable punctuality, the rains in that region cease on the 15th September.

Some weeks earlier, an Italian detachment from Eritrea had driven a small British garrison out of Kassala<sup>1</sup>—an important centre on the railway from Port Sudan, by Sennar and the Blue Nile, to Khartum. At the same time other detachments had succeeded in occupying the towns of Gellabat

<sup>1</sup> Kassala had been the scene of considerable fighting after the disaster of Adowa, and had then been successfully held by the Italian garrison. In 1897, however, owing to the expense of maintaining a large garrison to protect it against the inroads of the Dervishes, Italy ceded the town voluntarily to Britain. As the Dervish power was broken by Kitchener at Omdurman in the following year, she has regretted the cession ever since, and, possibly partly for that reason, made it one of her objectives forty-four years afterwards.

and Kurmuk, just inside the Sudan frontier. These three positions formed good jumping-off points for an advance on Khartum ; and it was, therefore, confidently expected that this stroke would be made and would synchronize with Graziani's invasion along the coast, if only to compel the British commander to divide his forces. Curiously enough, nothing of the sort happened. The Italian forces on the Sudan border did not stir, did not even pretend to do so ; and Graziani advanced alone.

We may now turn back to actions in the period prior to the invasion ; for, though conducted, on the British side, on a minor scale, they had a considerable bearing on the later events.

Along the coast and along the frontier, the Italians, who love building and are experts at it, had constructed a number of forts which were intended for use as required either to protect the frontier against an attack from Egypt or to cover the deployment of their own army. As Graziani concentrated towards his eastern border, there was naturally considerable movement of troops and transport between these posts. This, in spite of the terrific heat, afforded an opportunity for action on the part of British light mechanized units. By swift and daring strokes they would penetrate or circumvent the line of forts and attack enemy convoys, often in the process engaging enemy tanks as well. In these combats they were almost uniformly successful ; and to such an extent that a comparison of our casualties with those in the published Italian casualty lists shows that the proportion of losses—Italian to British—was as 20 to 1. The effect of this on Fascist morale was no doubt disastrous and probably accounts for some of the surprising incidents of the main campaign which followed.

Our mechanized units did not confine their attentions to the frontier districts. On the contrary, they ranged far and wide through Libya, threatening the great oases, cutting up convoys moving between them, and learning—what was to stand them in good stead afterwards—the lie of the land and the capabilities of their vehicles for movement across the country. There was much romantic adventure in their expeditions, and there were the toughest of tough contests of man and machine, to which both stood up finely, with the obstacles of ground, climate and lack of water.

High above the tanks, the knights of the air were dealing with the foe in similar fashion. In the early days no Hurricanes or Spitfires were available. In fact, the machines in the Middle East were mainly obsolescent types and of relatively low performance. But that did not damp the spirit of the pilots. They attacked the enemy at sight whatever the disproportion of numbers and, in spite of a considerable numerical inferiority, established in their particular province a mastery which they never lost. At the same time the bombers found excellent targets in enemy troops massing on the frontier and in enemy supply ports and ships along the coasts of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. In the East African theatre, oil-tanks were made a special objective in order to reduce Italian reserves of fuel in the country. There the R.A.F. raided the more northerly areas, while the South African Air Force, which had established itself in Kenya, tackled those in the south, particularly the ports of Italian Somaliland. Assab, the newly-constructed harbour and aerodrome near the Bab el Mandeb, seems to have received priority of attention—probably from the R.A.F. at Aden. In spite of the tremendous

pressure maintained, the great distances flown over the wildest of country, and the excellent results achieved, listeners constantly heard the wireless report end with the welcome sentence : ' From all these operations our aircraft returned safely.'

The Italian reply was feeble in the extreme. Alexandria was occasionally raided, the bombs falling, as a rule, harmlessly into the water. Mersa Matruh received a good deal of attention, but the garrison of that position was well protected against attack. Aden, dangerously near Assab and other Abyssinian aerodromes, might have received the heaviest of punishment. Actually it escaped lightly. The only point at which the Italians appear to have achieved any success worth recounting was at Haifa, where squadrons from the Dodecanese Islands damaged the refineries on two occasions.

We may now turn to the performances of the navy. The British sailor was unlikely to remain idle while his comrades of land and air were so effectively busy. Apart from his normal task of convoying supplies to the small ports of Mersa Matruh and Sollum, he kept the coast-line clear of Italian warships, and, at intervals, he carried out fierce bombardments against Libyan harbours and forts. In this way he drove the garrison out of Fort Capuzzo and caused much damage to the harbour at Bardia and to the seaplane base at Bomba.

These sudden hurricane eruptions are a notable new feature of maritime warfare. Formerly, and indeed up to a quite recent date, coastal defences, designed to meet the scale of attack indicated as probable by the political situation, were regarded as a most effective form of protection to harbours, mainly from their value as a deterrent from attack ; witness even Nelson's well-known dislike of assail-

ing shore-batteries and the baneful influence exercised by the ill-equipped Turkish forts at the Dardanelles. In spite, however, of the effect that the loss of one or more of the enormous, costly and exiguous capital ships of a fleet might have on the maritime situation, there has, in the present war, been a remarkable change in this respect. Apart from action against the Libyan coast, there have been fierce and successful bombardments of such important bases as Cherbourg, Genoa, and Ostend ; and, in each case, the fleet appears to have escaped unscathed. The answer to the riddle may be that the architects of coastal defences have not yet realized the recent increase in the weight of warship attack. Their forts, surprised in the first instance by the suddenness of the assault, are prevented by a hail of projectiles from the smaller weapons even from coming into action. Meanwhile the guns of heavier calibre—15-inch and thereabouts—ranged from the air, attack pre-selected objectives of outstanding importance. Fleet-fighters are busy keeping enemy bombers on the ground, and fleet-bombers add to the general destruction of military targets. Then, after a given period, crammed with event, but short enough to deny to the enemy the time to deploy his full countering strength, the squadrons draw rapidly off.

The aerial and naval actions in Libya must have had an effect on enemy morale as depressing as those of our mechanized forces. And the Italian foot-soldiers—luckless peasants for the most part—no doubt wondered why they had been drawn from the plains of Lombardy or the Calabrian hills, to be assailed continually from land, sea and sky without adequate protection or power of reply. Certainly, in these early days were sown in Italian hearts



FILLING A WATER TANK



KING GEORGE OF GREECE IN CONVERSATION  
WITH GENERAL METAXAS

some of the seeds that were to fructify so freely at Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Benghazi. For long, however, they lay germinating unseen, their existence sensed, no doubt, by the warriors who had sown them, but unsuspected by an onlooking and anxious public.

We may now return, after a lengthy digression, to Graziani's invasion. On the first day, he captured the little port of Sollum—a feat described in the Axis press as a striking victory, and as the seizure from us of an important naval base. Actually, as the Italians advanced, the two platoons guarding the village withdrew, fighting a mild rearguard action as they departed. During the next four days, Graziani, moving cautiously forward, occupied Buq Buq and then Sidi Barrani, having covered sixty miles from the frontier, or one-fifth of the whole distance to Alexandria—quite a creditable performance. He had experienced no easy passage, however. He had been directly opposed, indeed, only by light mechanized units, which fought skilful delaying actions without ever allowing themselves to become seriously engaged ; but he suffered considerably from naval shelling and aerial bombing along his single line of operations. These attentions emphasized for him the dangers of the adventure on which he had embarked—dangers that were likely to multiply *pari passu* with the length of his advance.

He might, indeed, had he made the attempt, have succeeded in deepening his invasion considerably ; for Wavell had no intention of fighting a defensive battle 130 miles ahead of his railhead at Mersa Matruh and 300 miles from his base at Alexandria. To have done so, while his forces were still very weak numerically in comparison with those of his



opponent and while there was still a possibility, if not a likelihood, of German aerial aid to Graziani, would have been faulty in the extreme. Had he repulsed the invader, the victory would have been indecisive, and the invasion would, no doubt, have been renewed. On the other hand, bound as he was by a tenuous connection to a distant base and without an alternative line of retreat, defeat in an advanced position might well have entailed disaster to his army and the consequent loss of Egypt.

He probably intended to challenge the invader seriously for the first time at Mersa Matruh, which, as railhead and as a useful little port, was something of a prize and whose extensive fortifications might compensate for numerical inferiority. He certainly did not dispose at this time of forces of sufficient strength or administrative capacity for undertaking a serious offensive movement. That might come later as further reinforcements arrived, and as Graziani became more and more deeply involved in his perilous enterprise. Meanwhile, Wavell's task was to impose, with the aid of the navy and the air force and without committing himself *au fond*, the maximum of delay and hindrance upon the enemy. To allow him to approach close to Alexandria before striking back, would be dangerous both militarily and politically: militarily, because of the aerial menace to our naval base and the Suez Canal, and politically, because such action would diminish our prestige in Egypt and throughout the Middle East.

Graziani, however, solved all our perplexities by making a long halt at Sidi Barrani. There he set to work at improving his communications and his water supply, and at building up reserves of stores for a further advance—all of which was perfectly

sound. On the Libyan side of the frontier, the coastal road was excellent, and for years past wells had been dug there and pipe-lines laid in preparation for this invasion. But, on the Egyptian side, from which there had never been any thought of aggression, the road had, for defensive purposes, been intentionally left in a primitive state ; and the British troops in their withdrawal had destroyed such wells as existed. The invaders had, therefore, much work to do ; and it was of a type thoroughly suited to the Italian, who is a first-class engineer and in demand all over Europe as a road-maker.

The weeks passed, however. The road, even up the steep escarpment near Sollum, was made fit for motor-transport. A pipe-line was installed and carried water to the front from the great aqueduct near Cyrene. Supplies in large quantities were accumulated. All the needs of Sidi Barrani as an advanced base had, in fact, been fulfilled.

Still, however, Graziani hesitated, nay more, he commenced to dig—not the light trenches a victorious invader needs for his temporary protection, but fortifications of a semi-permanent nature. He began to cover both his front and his southern flank with heavily-entrenched perimeter-camps, each some three to four miles in circumference and replete with guns—field, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft. These he evidently regarded, after his experience of our guerrilla tactics in Libya, as the answer, in desert warfare, to mechanized assault by ground and air. Whether he realized that, in existing circumstances, further pursuit of his enterprise would be perilous and was, therefore, waiting for reinforcements of men and tanks, or for the Italian fleet to break out and take command of the sea, or for a successful issue to the invasion of Greece, which had been

initiated during his stay ; or whether it was that the hammerings he had received from sea and sky had demoralized both him and his troops, has not yet been disclosed. Certain it is that, instead of halting for a week or two to consolidate his position prior to a further advance, he actually spent three months in building fortifications on a scale which seemed to betoken no thought of further offensive action. However low the morale of his troops may have been when they crossed the border, it must have suffered a great further deterioration at the abandonment of their loudly trumpeted adventure for a purely defensive attitude. It is interesting to learn from Mussolini's speech on the 23rd of February that he and Graziani had decided to take the offensive on a date five to ten days after Wavell struck. It is quite possible, however, that they made this plan once a week during their three months of inaction, and, in view of the lions they saw in their path, would have continued for months more to make the same decision without ever acting upon it.

It is much easier to write of operations of the Italians than of those of the British forces ; for, while successive defeats have exposed the numbers, equipment, positions, and intentions of the former, a veil has been wisely placed over most of these matters in connection with our own troops.

Certain matters, however, are not secret. Among them is the personality of the commander, and that, in war, is the most important matter of all ; for it is up to the commander not only to plan, to contrive, and to dare, but also, in a sphere where the spirit rules as ever, to inspire. Some knowledge of his make-up may, therefore, provide the key to his actions and furnish a foundation on which to base further judgments.

General Sir Archibald Wavell comes of a distinguished military family. His father, Major-General A. G. Wavell, commanded the Black Watch, and the son served in the same regiment. Wavell was a Winchester scholar and passed first into the Staff College. He is an able writer ; and it is of interest that the most valuable of his contributions to military literature consists of essays on generalship. His book on the campaign in Palestine is the classic on that subject, and he has recently written an excellent biography of his old chief, Allenby. Clearly, therefore, he possesses brains. But a commander needs more than brains : he needs the combination of brains with character if he is to fulfil a high role.

Sir William Robertson—and ‘ Wullie ’ was no mean judge—regarded Wavell as the ablest officer who passed through his hands during his four years’ tenure of the appointment of Commandant of the Staff College ; and ability certainly implies more than mere intelligence.

Apart, however, from any recorded statements, Wavell is well known throughout the army as a man of resolution and courage, rather of the strong, rugged, and silent type, and robust physically, mentally, and morally. His personality—with always something in reserve behind it—is in fact outstanding. He may prove finally victorious in whatever campaigns he undertakes or he may eventually fail, for the greatest leaders do not necessarily command success. But, win or lose, all who serve with him are content that their fate and that of the country should be in his hands.

He has had a wide soldiering experience. He served in the South African War and on the Indian Frontier, became a Russian interpreter, won the

Military Cross in France, then went as Military Attaché to the Russian army in the Caucasus and, lastly, as regards the first world war, he served as a staff officer under Allenby in the final victory in Palestine, later becoming Chief Staff Officer of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

Thereafter, in peace, he went through the whole gamut of commands—of an infantry brigade, of a division, of Palestine in 1937–38 and of the Southern Command. What better apprenticeship to his present post could be desired?

Prior to his sudden leap into fame, it was as a trainer of men that his reputation stood especially high. Therefore, as comparatively raw troops arrived shipload after shipload in the Middle East, he was able, on a vast and admirable manœuvre-ground, to give his army the full benefit of that quality.

Curiously enough, shortly before the war, General Keitel, now Chief of the German General Staff, wrote of Wavell in the *Deutsche Wehr*, the military organ of the Nazi party :

‘In the British army to-day, there is only one good general, but he is incomparably good. The others have no proper conception of the direction of mechanized warfare, but this officer from 1928 onwards has studied the subject, and he may well prove the dominant personality in any war within the next five years.’<sup>1</sup>

The commander of the British forces in Egypt and the commander of the field army in the Egypt-Libyan theatre—is (or rather was, for he has held several appointments since) Sir H. Maitland Wilson. He is a large, cheerful, confident soldier, widely

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from “Outposts of War,” by Gordon Young.

known less as Sir Maitland than as 'Jumbo.' He, too, had commanded first a brigade and then a division before being appointed to his present post and, as he had been a chief instructor at the Staff College, he had been afforded the opportunity of a close study of modern warfare in all its guises.

A most fortunate circumstance just prior to the war was the creation in the Middle East of a single chief command—which comprised the control of the smaller commands in Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine, Kenya, and Uganda. It empowered the Commander-in-Chief to cover with his view the whole of the Middle East, to dispose his troops to the best advantage, often in anticipation of events, in accordance with the situation as a whole, and to concert plans for action with allies or potential allies such as the Turks and the French in Syria. Moreover, it enabled the War Office to deal with a single authority instead of several, and to receive a single expert opinion instead of having to decide between several expert and perhaps conflicting opinions. This sound organization of a command which ranged for 2,000 miles from the Sea of Galilee to Lake Victoria and for 1,500 miles across the Sudan to the border of British Somaliland has, owing to the enlarged flexibility it afforded to the military weapon, probably been worth several thousand troops to the country.

Of the composition and strength of the British forces in the Middle East at the opening of Wavell's offensive but little has transpired. There was certainly in the field at least one armoured division containing mechanized cavalry brigades, tank brigades, mechanized artillery, engineers and signals, motorized infantry battalions, and auxiliary services. There was an Anzac Corps of Australians and

New Zealanders and a British Corps whose content has not been stated, but which may have contained *inter alia* the Indian division or divisions which fought at Sidi Barrani and captured no less than 14,000 prisoners.

Palestine, where the situation was quiet and where no major operations were impending, was probably held by a regiment or two of cavalry and a battalion or two of infantry. The Egyptian army was, no doubt, disposed to guard all the vulnerable points in its own country. Kenya and Uganda were garrisoned by their own locally raised units reinforced by troops from the Rhodesias, South Africa, and Nigeria. This vast, scattered and somewhat heterogeneous command was knit together, as already stated, by single control and also by the pervasive influences of a navy which had control of the sea, and an air force which ruled the air.

On the numbers and tonnage of warships and the number and nature of aircraft, official secrecy is rightly as adamant as with the content of the army.



GREEK INFANTRY ON MANŒUVRES





GREEKS IN ACTION



GREEKS CHARGING OVER A MOUNTAIN SANGAR



GREEKS IN OBSERVATION

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GLORY THAT IS GREECE

IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE, THREE striking events succeeded the Italian invasion of Egypt. They were the occupation of Rumania by Germany, the wanton and unprovoked attack on Greece, and the British naval victories off Taranto and Sardinia. They all had a considerable bearing on the operations of the British armies in Africa.

#### *The Occupation of Rumania*

Hitler, foiled in his plans against Britain, on the successful invasion of which he had placed such high hopes, was naturally anxious to elaborate fresh and dazzling designs that would at once satisfy a disappointed people and give a favourable turn to German prospects. An occupation of Rumania might, with a little judicious bribery to her neighbours, be easily effected. Success there, highly boosted by Goebbels, might restore a waning prestige at home and abroad. It would safeguard the most important of Germany's sources of oil supply, thought to be threatened at this period by sabotage on the part of the engineers on the staff of the oil companies, and, later, it might form a spring-board for other adventures, such as the subjection to Nazi control of all the Balkan States, or the invasion of the Ukraine or a stroke towards Iraq and Iran, as opportunities might arise.

Hitler is a generous soul, always ready to make presents of property that he does not possess. On this occasion, in order to facilitate his invasion, he offered Bessarabia to Russia, a large part of Transylvania to Hungary, the Southern Dobrudja to Bulgaria and ministerial power to the pro-German party in Rumania. The baits were taken. They had the dual effect of eliminating opposition from the Powers immediately concerned and of weakening Rumania herself through dismemberment and internal dissension. Consequently, Nazi troops were enabled to pour into Bucharest. First of all came airmen and anti-aircraft guns, intended to protect the oil-fields against possible British aerial action from aerodromes in Turkey or Greece. Then came what was supposed to be a military mission intended to train the Rumanian army, but was in reality a regular fighting formation. Thereafter, as control was extended and plans developed, division after division of regular troops succeeded the first arrivals.

It was widely expected that Hitler would invade Turkey and then swing round to the south through Syria in order, in combination with Graziani's invading host, to form a mighty pair of pincers intended to effect the envelopment and destruction of the Army of the Nile.

Such action would, however, almost certainly have brought both Turkey and Russia in against him : Turkey, in direct defence of her country, and Russia, partly because she could hardly endure the spectacle of a great military power in Istanbul and partly, and more importantly, because she realized that Germany, once across the Bosphorus, would be within reach by air and even by land of Baku, on whose oil the Soviet's highly mechanized industries

and agriculture mainly depended. Hitler could not at that moment face such a combination of new enemies. He intended, indeed, to deal with Russia in his own time, but only after he had made the fullest preparation for the adventure.

He hoped, no doubt, that a successful invasion of Greece would afford the Italian fleet fresh bases and render it dominant in the eastern Mediterranean ; and that then he and Mussolini would be free to transport troops to Syria and Egypt with a view to placing the East in thrall. Italian failures there and in Africa disappointed his expectations, however, and compelled his nimble brain to get busy at fresh machinations.

### *The Attack upon Greece*

At 3 a.m. on the 19th October, Metaxas—Prime Minister and Dictator of Greece—was turned out of bed to receive an ultimatum, which was to expire at 6 a.m., demanding the cession to Italy of several key points whose surrender would have entailed the complete subjection of his country to Fascist control. He unhesitatingly refused and, accepting the demand as a declaration of war, issued the order for mobilization. On the same day, the Italians began their advance towards the Greco-Albanian frontier.

It is said that Mussolini undertook the invasion either against the wishes or without the knowledge of his brother dictator. Nothing is more unlikely. Hitler, whose habit it was to make foreign potentates pay homage at Berchtesgaden, had been thoroughly shaken by his defeat over Britain and had since been nervously and vainly scuttling over Europe, begging first Franco and then Pétain to subscribe to his nefarious plots. 'Rather at his wits'

end for a new and world-shaking stroke, and, no doubt, with the expectation that the conquest of Greece would assist in any plans he might devise for action in the East, it was he, probably, who urged Mussolini to the aggression. He, himself, kept out of it because, by so doing, he would be enabled to retain his agents in Athens and, should the Greeks put up a fight, to offer his services as a mediator, in which guise he might hope to whittle down the strength of Greece and her opposition to the wishes of the Axis Powers. Moreover, temporary abstention from co-burglarship with his brother-criminal would not prevent him from participation in the crime, if and when he thought such action advisable.

The *Duce* had long determined to invade Greece. That was clear from the number of times he had assured the Greek Government of his unshakable friendship and of his intention to abide by treaties. It was clear, too, from the number of frontier incidents he invented and from his ludicrous tales of Greek atrocities. But it is almost incredible that, of his own free will, he would have initiated a campaign at the beginning of winter in the Greek mountains, where roads were atrocious and snow would soon be falling. There were only two possible excuses that could be urged for such action: the one that his intelligence branch in Athens had given him to believe that Metaxas would at once surrender to his demands; the other, valid only if he expected to catch the British navy asleep, that possession of Greek naval bases would enable his fleet to safeguard the transport of troops and supplies to Libya and thereby assist Graziani to continue his advance. However, these are points that can only be guessed at the moment. It is more

profitable to turn to the facts of the ensuing campaign.

Greece consists of a mountainous peninsula, of numerous islands and, between Bulgaria and the Aegean, of a strip of comparatively low-lying country which reaches out to the Turkish border on the Maritza. The peninsula, with which we are chiefly concerned, consists in the main of the great spinal cord of the Pindus mountains which, rising to a height of 9,000 feet, divides the country into two approximately equal parts. The ridge is traversed only by two roads that are fit for wheeled transport: in the centre by a second-rate road connecting Epirus with Thessaly by the pass of Metsovo and in the north by a winding road passing through deep gorges from Koritza to Florina. The principal highways of the country run north and south on either flank of the mountain and between it and the sea.

Greece is by no means easily accessible from the north. The only approach by rail runs through Yugoslavia, along the narrow Vardar valley and, after throwing off a branch to the Monastir gap, reaches the Aegean at Salonika. From Sofia, a line follows the Struma valley to Rupel, beyond which point the journey has to be continued by road through the Rupel Pass to Demirhissar and thence by road or rail to Salonika. From Albania there is a good road along the western coastal plain to Epirus. But the most important approach—that from the west by Koritza and Florina to Salonika and Athens—is a tough proposition. It can be avoided by a long detour on a good road round Lake Prespa to Monastir, but the use of the latter would require the complicity of Yugoslavia.



The Italian plan is not easily discernible because, except at one point, it never got fully under weigh. Apparently, however, it aimed at an advance in three columns. The principal column was on the left and was intended to force its way by Koritza and Florina to Salonika and perhaps Athens. The second, consisting of the Third Alpine Division, was in the centre and, being equipped with pack-transport, was intended to move along the Pindus ridge. It was probably ordered, in the expected absence of any serious resistance, to seize Metsovo, thus separating Greeks in Thessaly from those in Epirus, and then to descend to Yanina. The third column on the right was to advance by the coastal road into Epirus, though apparently without any strategic objective beyond that of extending the control of the Fascist navy southwards from the Adriatic by capturing bases on the Ionian Sea and on the Gulf of Corinth.

The Italians appear at the outset to have had in Albania twelve divisions, two of them mechanized, totalling 200,000 to 250,000 men. They were fortunate in the possession of short sea-communications and excellent harbours in Durazzo and Valona. Otherwise, Albania is by no means an ideal base of operations. It is mountainous, rugged, barren. The roads indeed are well constructed, but, being few in number and running as they do through deep and narrow valleys, lateral connection between them is rare, and movement off them by wheeled transport but seldom possible. It was, therefore, difficult for the invaders to effect a concentration to a flank in order, in accordance with the situation, either to reinforce a threatened column or to shift the weight of attack. Consequently the three columns launched were unable



to co-operate effectively with one another and had thus to depend largely on their own supports and reserves—an inelastic and uneconomical arrangement.

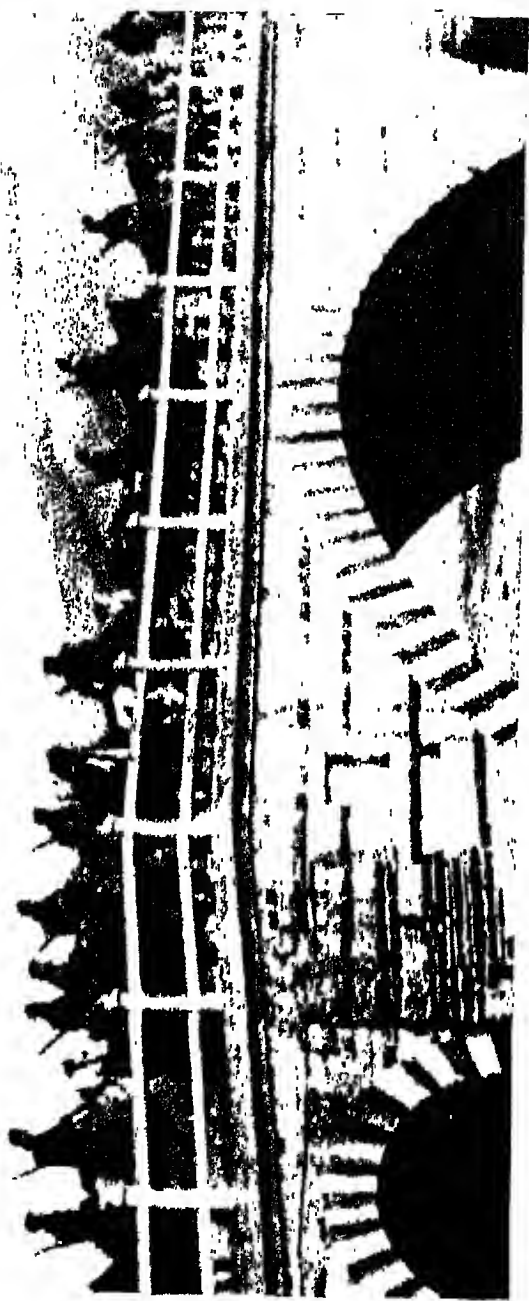
The Greeks were not wholly surprised by the Italian onslaught, for there was nothing in Mussolini's past to inspire them with trust in his promises. They were, therefore, able, covered by stout fighting on the part of their frontier troops, to effect a quick mobilization and soon to place some eleven divisions in the field numbering, perhaps, 150,000 men.

To meet a possible Italian invasion, they had already constructed two lines of fortifications parallel to the frontier, and it might have been supposed that they would have manned them. But Papagos, the Greek commander, had no such intention. He realized the moral value attached to offensive action and knew how well it suited the temperament of his fiery mountaineers. He was, therefore, counter-attacking almost before the aggressor had crossed the frontier, and there was soon evidence that both his strategy and his tactics were of a high order.

The Italian centre column, composed of crack mountain troops, appears from the first to have advanced rapidly and without the precautions normal to mountain warfare. The Greeks confronting the onset fell back in their centre while their flanks 'stayed put,' so that the Alpini eventually found themselves enveloped in a species of sack. They were then heavily counter-attacked. Kilted, red-hatted Evzones, flinging back their opponents, drove them helter-skelter over the frontier and, in rout along with them, some 6,000 reinforcements which had hurried to their assistance.



GREEK WOMEN CLEAR THE PASSES



GREEKS ENTER ARGYROCASTRO

In the meantime Papagos was preparing a master-stroke. His northern flank presented the gravest danger. Opposite to it, fifteen miles inside Albanian territory, lay Koritza. Through this important town runs the main road to Salonika—the great seaport which was likely to be the enemy's distant objective. Through it also runs a road from Durazzo southwards towards Yanina and another round Lake Presba to Monastir. Moreover, the Italians had an aerodrome there and the advanced base of their left column. It was, in fact, a key point. Papagos recognized this from the outset and, disregarding, as he opined he might do with impunity, the success with which the Italian column in the south was meeting, he concentrated the bulk of his force to the north, with the idea, not, indeed, of defending the defiles leading to Florina, but, in spite of inferior numbers and equipment, of launching an attack against Koritza. Utilizing Lake Presba as a protection to his right flank, he succeeded after some weeks of bitter fighting in effecting its capture and, in so doing, won a signal victory, the most important in the first four months of the war.

Only in the south, along the western coast, did the Italians meet with any success. There, assisted by a number of light tanks, the right column advanced some fifteen miles into Greek territory and reached the banks of the Kalamas River, beyond which it formed a bridge-head. Once Koritza was taken, however, it found itself in a dangerous salient and thought it wise to withdraw. The Italian invasion was over.

In the meantime Papagos had not allowed the grass to grow under his feet. He had taken Koritza on the 21st of November. On the 24th of that

month, he had driven his opponents back beyond Pogradetz on Lake Ochrida, twenty miles farther north as the crow flies. Having thus completely obviated the danger to his right flank and expecting no further benefit to be gained at the moment by further advance in that quarter, he sought another opening.

The Greeks had but few lorries or armoured fighting vehicles and, had they been operating on the plains, would have been at a grave disadvantage in this respect. But, in a rough theatre of war, they were more mobile on their feet than were their opponents on wheels or tracks. Papagos, therefore, enjoyed a superiority in power of manœuvre from which he repeatedly drew profit—tactically, by outflanking the Italian columns in their narrow valleys and, strategically, by transferring divisions from point to point, according to the requirements of the situation.

Thus, after the seizure of Pogradetz, he massed for one operation towards his centre and then for a second towards his left where, after a severe struggle, he captured Argyrocastro, the enemy's advanced base on the southern flank. Pursuing this strategy in spite of the most appalling conditions of weather, he gradually closed towards Valona, capturing Chimara on the sea-coast and Klisura, a key point naturally strong and heavily defended, at the junction of main roads leading to Valona and Durazzo.

It was in vain that the Italians, in the hope of putting a stop to this steady progress, changed their commanders. It was equally in vain that Caballero—the third of the series—launched counter-attack after counter-attack supported by tanks along the whole line. The Greeks held on, threw back the

enemy beyond his starting-line and then occupied his trenches.

The pace of their advance was, however, inevitably slow. They were fighting at the end of long, winding mountain roads, that were disintegrating under the tramp of armies and the solvent effect of snow and rain ; whereas their opponents enjoyed the benefit of short and comparatively good communications. They were, therefore, continually at a disadvantage in respect to supplies ; and, owing to scarcity of ammunition, they were compelled to carry out, among snow-clad peaks, long and difficult encircling movements which enabled them, through the use of enfilade fire, to give every round its full value and which culminated amidst wild cheers in a charge with the bayonet. The respective strengths of the opposing forces have naturally not been disclosed ; but it is reasonable to suppose that, when the Greeks were fully mobilized and the *Duce* had been compelled to despatch large reinforcements to the front to prevent further retreat, there were about 600,000 men at grips in southern Albania and that the numbers engaged on either side were roughly equal.

The Greek soldier, always at his best when his passions are roused, showed himself to be a fierce and hardy fighter worthy of the highest traditions of his race. Furious at the wanton assault on his home, and imbued with long-standing hatred and contempt for his opponent, he was inspired to prodigies of valour, and, fortunately, his efforts were ably directed. Most wonderful was the courage with which he bore the almost incredible hardships of a winter campaign.

Here for the moment we may leave the Greek



army. While it is forcing the enemy back inch by inch, no doubt at the cost of many a noble sacrifice, it is keeping an anxious eye on the possibility of being taken in rear by a German advance through the Vardar and the Struma valleys.

We may now turn to the fighting in the air. In that sphere, the Italians enjoyed immense advantages : good bases close at hand in Italy ; numerous prepared aerodromes in Albania ; superiority both in type of machine and in numbers. So overwhelming were these advantages in fact that they might have proved decisive in the very opening stages had it not been for the prompt, effective, and continuous aid rendered by the R.A.F.

The Italians, however, were, and remained, greatly superior in numbers to the joint air force ; but, fortunately for the Allies, they squandered their strength in futile fashion. Instead of attacking bases, lines of communications, reserves, and troops in action, they appear to have dispersed their energies widely over a number of unimportant towns and villages unrelated to any strategic design. Particularly did they devote attention to the beautiful island of Corfu, open and undefended though it was. In short, just as in other theatres, so in Albania, the *Regia Aeronautica* must have proved a bitter disappointment to those who had believed in its boasts and in the fulsome tributes paid to it by Mussolini.

Nevertheless, numbers do tell ; and the British and Greek air forces were accordingly kept at the limit of strain in their ceaseless endeavours to afford protection to the troops in the field and to interrupt the delivery of Italian supplies.

Throughout the operations, the British navy, too, was rendering priceless help. Its range and

power of manœuvre had, of course, been immensely extended by its new-found ability to utilize the many excellent harbours in Greece and in the Greek islands, Suda Bay in Crete being of particular value to it for threatening the movements of troops and supplies between Italy and Libya, and Italy and Albania. In fact the invasion of Greece had offered it a wonderful opportunity, of which it took instant advantage. The first fruits were quickly evident in its victory on the 11th of November at Taranto. Achieved through the medium of the Fleet Air Arm, this magnificent exploit was the most decisive stroke yet delivered in the maritime conflict. Amongst other destruction wrought, three out of six battleships in the Italian navy were seriously crippled and, at a stroke, the whole naval balance of power in the Mediterranean was altered in British and Greek favour.

The most interesting feature at Taranto was the success of the torpedo-carrying aircraft which were credited with the greater part of the damage occasioned to the Italian fleet. These machines, in order to launch their projectiles accurately, have to approach the target head-on to short range at a height of twenty to fifty feet above the water. They can thus be engaged not only by the bulk of the anti-aircraft guns, but also by most of the ship's light armament. The percentage of aircraft that would escape the resultant hail of shell and bullets seemed likely to be so small that the employment of torpedo-carrying aircraft was regarded in many quarters as impracticable. It was a matter of great surprise, therefore, that their success on this occasion was bought at a cost of only two machines, the crews of which both effected successful parachute landings.

During the following night, British light craft sank four supply ships and two destroyers in the Straits of Otranto and, from that time onwards, continued, with the assistance of Greek submarines, to render the supply of Italian troops in Albania precarious and costly. Furthermore, a deep invasion of the Adriatic which, since the rape of Albania, had, unlike the Mediterranean, been in truth a Roman lake, was effected by some of our larger vessels, and ports on its eastern coast-line were heavily bombarded.

On the whole, therefore, it will be seen that Britain's engagement to stand by Greece in the event of aggression was well fulfilled through direct naval and aerial action. There were many, however, who thought that we should have sent an army to her aid. The instance of our assistance to Spain from 1807 to 1814 was appropriately quoted. In that campaign, thanks to our command of the sea, our army was able to render effective and unceasing support to a stout nation which refused to be enslaved ; and, in the process, it succeeded in sucking the life-blood from the giant armies flung over Napoleonic Europe. In similar fashion, help to the gallant Greeks, based again on our command of the sea, seemed to offer an opportunity, otherwise hard to find, of meeting the German army on ground of our own choosing and of then sapping its strength. Opinion was divided as to whether we should take advantage of the favourable strategic situation created by the capture of Koritza to drive the Italian army into the sea, or should occupy Salonika and, from that key point, protect the right flank of our ally against possible incursions through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, at the same time reaching out our aerial arm to the oilfields at Ploesti.

There was much to be said in favour of lending direct assistance on land. At that time, however, the Army of the Nile was thought to be only just strong enough to fulfil its task of protecting the extensive British interests in the Middle East. Divided, it might have fallen between two stools : no Sidi Barrani or sufficient strength to prevent Greece from being overrun by the German invasion which our action would have invited. Moreover, in Egypt we knew our problems of ground and climate. We were equipped to deal with them and even preparing to strike. In Greece, we should need new plans and a different equipment and training. Instead of streaking across dusty deserts, we should be crawling up snow-clad mountains. We had already experienced this sort of difficulty when troops, equipped and trained to fight in France, had to be despatched to the help of Norway. Such changes have often to be faced by the soldier, but they are to be avoided if reasonably possible, for they may prove a serious handicap to his efficiency.

Finally, there was the question of transport. The Army of the Nile had three roads of supply available : the Mediterranean, the Cape route, and the Indian Ocean. The British army in Greece, for whose service a number of additional vessels would be required, would have one only—the Mediterranean, and that still infested by numerous submarines which would then be afforded a favourable opportunity of reducing our vital yet exiguous shipping.

The British Government appears, therefore, to have reached the correct decision, namely, to afford Greece direct naval and aerial support and to assist the Greek army in Albania by striking in full

strength at the Italians in Africa. Their judgment was fully vindicated by events ; but they had to keep the matter under constant consideration so as to be able to deal with new situations as they arose.

## CHAPTER V

### SIDI BARRANI

**A**FTER MONTHS OF HARD AND TOILSOME training, the British soldier, whether home-grown, Australian, New Zealander, or Indian, was burning to change his mimic warfare for the real article. Confidence in leadership, confidence in weapons, and the splendid successes achieved by the R.A.F. and, on a smaller scale, by the armoured division, had raised his naturally high morale to boiling-point and given him a feeling of contempt for the enemy which was enhanced by the inexplicably long halt at Sidi Barrani.

Wavell would never have allowed such long grace to Graziani had it not been for the necessity of despatching British aircraft to assist the Greeks. However, as soon as a sufficiency of replacements had been effected, he struck his long-maturing blow.

Although the bulk of his force lay in and east of Mersa Matruh, he had never for a moment lost touch with his opponent. His aircraft were viewing and photographing, and his mechanized forces ceaselessly tapping the hostile front, so that the enemy could not make a move or build new entrenchments without reports of his action quickly reaching Headquarters at Cairo.

The British commander, with his mind bent on striking, was naturally seeking joints in the Italian armour. Aerial reconnaissance, confirmed and amplified by the ground reconnaissance of a staff

officer, gave him what he needed. It was discovered that two of the fortified camps in the southern line protecting the right rear of the advanced base at Sidi Barrani were separated by a wide gap and, owing to the configuration of the ground, could not afford each other mutual support. On receiving this information, Wavell, so the story runs, detailed a mechanized unit to maintain on the gap a watch, persistent without being obvious, and to interfere at once with any attempt at building works to fill it. This gap was to play a principal part in the ensuing battle.

### *Wavell's Plan*

In deciding to strike, Wavell had made a momentous decision. He must have remembered how clearly it was proved in the years preceding hostilities that an army undertaking an offensive against an entrenched enemy must, if it was to have any prospect of success, have a superiority of at least three to one. Yet, here he was breaking this sacred principle and daring to attack with an army greatly inferior in numbers both locally and over the whole eastern theatre of war. How foolish he would look if he were to receive the punishment he seemed to deserve for his ill-judged temerity! Perhaps he was influenced, knowing the spirit of his troops, by the Napoleonic adage that 'The moral is to the physical as three to one.' Perhaps, too, by confidence in his own skill and that of his subordinate leaders and by the superlative performances of the R.A.F.

Having decided to strike, he had to make his plan. The problem confronting him looked barely soluble. He had to defeat a skilful and wary

opponent who disposed of an army superior in numbers, heavily entrenched and protected to some extent on one flank by the desert and on the other by the sea.

He could hope to achieve his task only by effecting a surprise. But the desert was as bare as the palm of his hand, and all the approaches were known to the enemy. If he assembled behind Mersa Matruh, it would take his infantry five forced marches to cover the distance of seventy-five miles between the two armies. Even if the troops moved by night and rested by day, they would be unable to escape observation were a single hostile aeroplane to pass over them.

Clearly, therefore, a pedestrian advance could not achieve surprise. On the other hand, he had insufficient motor-transport for the carriage of the numbers estimated as sufficient to defeat the enemy. He was, therefore, compelled, it seems, to choose, on the one hand, between carrying out, with some approach to equality in numbers, an attack clearly advertised by five days of observed movement, against heavily armed modern entrenchments, and, on the other hand, effecting a surprise by mounting as many men as possible in lorries and making a rapid crossing of the space intervening between the armies.

The former course could have been successful only at heavy cost, and it was unlikely to prove decisive. The latter was full of risks. If it failed to achieve surprise, as might well be the case, the motorized force would be far too weak to effect its purpose. It could, however, break off the engagement without much difficulty; and, if the stroke were blessed by fortune, there would be prospects of high success.



Clearly, then, the most important matter was to concentrate all energies on the attainment of surprise. Secrecy in preparation was the first step. No one apart from the principal staff officers and commanders were told of the plan, until, in the case of each subordinate in his turn, such knowledge became essential to the effective execution of his particular part in it. The second step was to ensure that the enemy obtained no inkling of the movement until the assailants were upon him. This task was assigned to the R.A.F. Fortunately for its accomplishment, the British airmen had, as already shown, achieved a marked moral superiority over the enemy. They were ordered to bomb every aerodrome in eastern Libya for twenty-four hours before the battle was joined, that is during the whole of the preliminary movement, so as, if possible, to prevent a single hostile aeroplane from leaving the ground. Incredible though it may seem, for they were operating against superior numbers of machines equal to their own in technical capacity, they succeeded completely in their mission, with the result that the march of the army was effected wholly unobserved from the air. And, almost as strangely, even on the ground no patrols seem to have been encountered.

The official report states that the space between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani was covered 'almost in a single bound.' This statement is a little obscure, but it may be taken to imply that the greater part of the movement was swiftly accomplished during the hours of darkness on the night of the 8th-9th of December, immediately prior to the attack which was delivered at dawn on the 9th.

Secrecy, concealment, and the swiftness of stroke

which deprives an adversary of the time needed to alter his dispositions to meet the attack are the negative preludes to surprise. The positive prelude is the deception of the enemy whether by feints, by the spread of rumours, or by agents. The opposing commander must be induced to believe either that no attack is likely to materialize or that it will be delivered from a direction—usually the most obvious—and at a time wholly different from those intended by the assailant.

Strategically, however, in this case there was no choice as regards direction, there being only one route of advance available for the main body of the assaulting army—that parallel to the seashore. The enemy commander had, therefore, to be beguiled into a belief that no attack would take place. There seem to have been two separate attempts to bring about the deception—the first in connection with the Italo-Greek campaign and the second a feint against Eritrea.

The war in Albania had now been in progress for more than a month. During that period the feasibility and strategic desirability of affording direct aid to the gallant Greeks had been freely discussed. The view was widely held and openly expressed that a large part of the Army of the Nile should, for the reasons already mentioned, be despatched to Greece.

On the 15th of November, just when the discussion was at its height and some three weeks before the battle of Sidi Barrani, it was publicly announced that General Sir Archibald Wavell had landed in Crete. There appeared to be no valid reason for his journey ; for, as there was already a Greek division quartered in the island, it is probable that only an insignificant detachment of British troops had been

sent there to carry out guard duties over naval and aerial establishments. Why, then, did the British commander make this particular journey? And, again, why did he—a man free from all taint of self-advertisement—take a newspaper correspondent as companion and allow him to publish a full account of his doings? Surely, because he wished to encourage a belief in enemy minds that he was concerting plans for the despatch of some of his divisions to Greece.

As regards the second stratagem—a feint against Eritrea—the most that the British commander could be expected, either by friend or foe, to do with the exiguous forces at his disposal, was to fight a pitched battle in one theatre. While, however, at this period, Egypt itself was quiet and scarcely ever in the news, there were repeated reports of British activities both at Kassala and Gellabat, intended possibly to give the impression that a British invasion of Abyssinia was impending. So Graziani may well have said to himself: ‘Well! If that is Wavell’s plan, he certainly won’t have enough troops to attack me.’

### *The Battle*

The first report of the engagement that reached London merely announced that advanced elements of our forces were in contact with the enemy along a broad front and, in an action at Nubeiwa, south of Sidi Barrani, had taken 1,000 prisoners.

*Communicés* on succeeding days gave a rapidly mounting tale of captures. It was stated that, by the evening of the second day, land forces had reached the coast between Sidi Barrani and Buq

Buq, that is, in rear of the Italian force under attack.

That was the decisive stroke ; and its genesis demands some elucidation, for it was carried out in pursuance of one of the most notable developments of modern warfare.

Wavell had taken part as chief staff officer of an army corps in Allenby's great victory at Megiddo, where a mobile cavalry had swept through a gate opened by the infantry in the enemy lines, had ridden round the rear of the Turkish army and had cut off the greater part of it. He had also, no doubt, studied the three final battles in Mesopotamia in 1918 in which, while infantry and guns pressed the Turks hard in front, cavalry rode round their flanks and placed a barrier of machine-guns across their line of retreat. These three actions were gems both of planning and execution and, from them, hardly a Turk escaped. The principle involved in them was the maximum exploitation of fire-power through superior mobility. The machine-gun, which, owing to its flat trajectory, is not at its best in attack, is the most powerful defensive weapon the world has known. But victories that count cannot be won by mere defensive action. Obviously, therefore, a use should be found, if possible, in offensive action for its high stopping power. This could be achieved if a line of machine-guns were placed behind the enemy in such fashion that he would have to fight his battle facing both ways and so that the burden of attacking the deadliest of small-arms would fall upon his shoulders. No enemy, however, would allow such action to be taken against him if he could in any way prevent it. To put prevention beyond his power, either surprise must be achieved or the machine-guns

must be afforded a degree of mobility sufficient to enable them to be moved wide round the hostile flanks. The latter demand implies that some portion of the attacking army must be at once more mobile and more powerful than the mobile forces at the enemy's disposal. Further demands are, of course, that the barrier set up must be strong enough to fulfil its task—not a particularly easy matter to gauge, and that it must be so placed as not to be subject to being sandwiched between two attacks. In Palestine and Mesopotamia the operation was carried out by cavalry—strong, highly trained, and skilfully handled—against an enemy weak in that arm.

The Germans adopted this method in their recent campaign in Poland, employing, in place of cavalry, motorized and mechanized divisions. By virtue of it, and because they were operating in a country peculiarly suited to such action, against a very gallant but most vulnerable horsed cavalry, and against an army relatively weak in aircraft, tanks, and anti-tank weapons, they were able to achieve a number of startling victories.

It will be remembered that the Polish army in the Poznan salient was out-flanked on the north-west by the Fourth German Army and on the south-west by the Eighth and Tenth Armies. On the 7th of September, it sought belatedly to withdraw on Warsaw between the Vistula and Warta Rivers. Pressed on two sides, it managed, nevertheless, to reach the Bzura, only to find that German armoured divisions, which had passed round its southern flank, had lined the banks of the river and cut it off from the capital. The Poles, compressed into a rectangle of steel some fifty miles long by twenty-five miles broad, made fierce efforts to break



GREEKS ON THE MARCH



CABLE-LAYING IN THE DESERT

out, but the fence of machine-guns proved impenetrable. After a week of epic fighting, they were compelled to lay down their arms to the number of 200,000 men—a stupendous disaster. Of exactly the same type, but on a smaller scale, were the German victories at Radom and Zamosc, where, in each case, 60,000 Poles were captured. Had it not been for the English Channel, the Germans would, no doubt, have tried similar tactics at Dunkirk.

They have lately been attempting the same manœuvres in Russia. They were victorious in the battle of Byalystock because, by their treacherous invasion, they achieved a high measure of surprise. Their later efforts in this direction were frustrated because, of the conditions fundamental to success, one was absent, namely, that the assailant must dispose of mobile fire-power at once more mobile and more powerful than that of his intended victim. Russian armoured forces were swift and strong enough to evade encirclement and to strike back; but, to continue that process after having suffered heavy losses in equipment may prove beyond their capacity.

Enough has been said on this point, however, to indicate what a tremendous weapon may be placed in the hands of a leader under favourable conditions such as those that obtained in Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Poland.

Wavell appears to have recognized this to the full, but he might well have doubted that the 'favourable conditions' were present. He was probably stronger than his adversary in armoured forces, both numerically and technically. He may, however, have been ignorant of the fact, for it was generally supposed that the Italian Army was highly and effectively mechanized. What he did know was, in



the first place, that the crews of his fighting vehicles had shown themselves, on many a minor battlefield, tactically and morally superior to their opponents ; in the second place, that a mobile force which has sheltered behind fortifications for three months will certainly have lost much both of its mobility and its efficiency ; and, in the third place, no doubt, thanks to the eyes of his aircraft, that Graziani had committed the fatal mistake of keeping his reserves sixty miles back, at Sollum, from which point it would be almost impossible for them to intervene effectively in the fight, either to confirm a victory or to prevent a defeat.

He had, therefore, no reason to fear the Italian mechanized force. In the open he could overwhelm it ; behind its entrenchments he could ignore it. Only if it pushed out reconnoitring detachments far to the east and south-east would it present a danger—namely, that of placing the Italians on the alert. Such action on its part was, however, improbable, for it had hitherto displayed no activity of that nature.

Through the gap, then, covered by a barrage of high explosives and smoke, and supported at a respectful distance by infantry, poured our heavy tanks. Firing furiously the while to right and left, they sped across the coastal road down to the seashore. On their course they dropped machine-guns and anti-tank guns both in tanks and on the ground, in the hope of effectively barring the retreat of such of the enemy as had not already taken to their heels. In this way they cut off the forward Italian divisions holding the advanced base from the main body whose head was at Sollum ; and the seal was set to the first British land victory of the war. Incidentally, as the tanks reached the sea, they

struck into an Italian division moving up peacefully to effect a routine relief. It was on this day that fate moved Graziani to cable to the *Duce*: 'The Black-shirts in Libya, together with the armoured forces, send their thoughts out to the *Duce* in the certainty of victory.'

Stress has been laid on the part played by the heavy tanks in the battle because of the interest attached to the tactics employed, which turned what might have been a mere slogging match into a decisive success. The infantry, the guns and the lighter tanks had a less spectacular but equally necessary task to fulfil. It was for them, by determined attack, to hold the enemy to his ground while the envelopment was in progress; and their conduct in this respect appears to have been flawless. Had they failed to press hotly, the Italians might have been able to turn in great strength against the barrier of machine-guns near Buq Buq and, sweeping it away, have made good their escape.

The R.A.F. added much to its laurels in these days of battle. By machine-gunning and bombing the enemy trenches, it afforded direct assistance to the infantry in the assault. By attacking its opponents in the air, whenever they appeared, and by bombing them on the ground, it prevented the Italian aircraft from having any influence whatever on the fortunes of the fight. In the four days—of 9th to 12th of December—it succeeded in destroying forty-one Italian aircraft against a loss of four British machines.

The navy, timing its actions admirably with those of the army, rendered valuable support. It distracted attention from the approach-march by shelling Maktila camp and Sidi Barrani during the night of the 8th–9th of December. Once the battle

was joined on shore, it bombarded the ports of Sollum and Bardia from which reserves might have been pushed up to restore the battle, and it hammered the enemy at successive focal points on his line of retreat. There was, in short, between the three services, a wonderful display of co-operation which is specially important in the case of British forces and is often so difficult to obtain.

The visible rewards of success were considerable. One general was killed and one corps commander, four divisional commanders and 26,000 other prisoners were captured—a figure which exceeded the numbers of the attacking army ; and the British losses totalled less than 1,000. What a change from the holocausts incurred at the Somme and Paschendaele in the gain of a few acres of sodden and shell-stricken ground ! It is of interest that the Italian *communiqué* of the 12th of December stated that losses inflicted on the enemy were heavy—and went on to add that Italian losses were ‘noticeable.’ They were—particularly to British commanders who had to collect the prisoners, marshal them, feed them and ship them to Egypt and elsewhere, to the interruption of the arrangements they wished to make for an immediate forward move. At Sidi Barrani, as was natural in the advanced base of the Axis armies that were to sweep forward to conquer the East, there was an immense quantity of stores including—to take three somewhat dissimilar commodities—great stocks of Chianti, gold-braided uniforms for dances in Cairo, and no less than a thousand lorries.

But it was the invisible, intangible results of the victory that counted most. The deadly menace to Alexandria and the Suez Canal had been removed. The Fascist pretence of competence and bravery,

long suspect, had been debunked. The reputation of Graziani, the conqueror of Libya and, since the resignation of Badoglio, the leading light in the army, had suffered a mortal shock. The links binding the British Commonwealth together had been strengthened by a truly imperial victory in which the Empire had been represented by Australia, New Zealand, India, and Britain.

At the close of the battle, such part of the army as could be spared and could be rendered mobile at once took up the pursuit; and it was greatly assisted in its task by the fleet and air force, to whom the enemy, retreating for the most part along the coastal road, presented an ideal target.

Considerable resistance was encountered at Sollum where the high escarpment, which marks the separation of the coastal belt from the desert, reaches the sea from the south-east and forces the road to climb by steep slopes and hair-pin bends to the plateau. Such a position would have been excellent for defence in olden days; but, in modern warfare, it offered a perfect target to guns by sea and land and to bombing aircraft. It was captured on the 16th of December, seven days after the outposts east of Sidi Barrani, sixty miles away, had been overrun. At the same time, Fort Capuzzo was stormed and the whole line of frontier forts penetrated.

Thus ended the second phase of the fighting. The Army of the Nile, since changing attack into pursuit, had captured another 13,000 prisoners and was now completely turning the tables upon its opponents by invading Libya.

We may now revert to some interesting factors affecting the fate of the battle, which were not treated earlier for fear of unduly disturbing the flow of the narrative.

It is said that, after the offensive had got under weigh, Wavell informed representatives of the Press that the range of his stroke depended entirely on what he succeeded in capturing from the Italians. His shortage of transport was such that, besides being unable to make use of all the troops he thought necessary, he could not carry the stores and supplies, especially petrol and water, required for the continuation of his action beyond Sidi Barrani. If he should miss complete success, or prove victorious and yet find the cupboard bare, then he intended to treat his enterprise as nothing more than a major raid. On the other hand, if fortune should favour him in respect of captures, he would exploit his victory to the utmost. That is to say, he had an elastic plan: he was ready to profit by opportunity, yet was prepared against adversity.

His decision to depend on captured supplies forms one of the most striking events of the campaign and was a distinct departure from orthodox conceptions. In modern warfare conducted upon a large scale, armies have ceased to live to any great extent upon the country or upon the enemy. Napoleon's method of existing partly upon captures and partly upon magazines and local requisitions, vanished with the appearance of railways. The capacity of goods-trains for the carriage of supplies was so enormous as compared with that of horsed transport that it seemed likely to fulfil all requirements and to render other means of supply insignificant and supererogatory. Accordingly, ever since the Prussian assault on Austria in 1866, when railways were first exploited on a large scale, armies have relied almost entirely on train transport, supplemented of late years by the lorry in the forward area.

It is true that the golden rule of the perfect quartermaster-general has always been and, in theory, still is, to make provision for the army at the base and on the lines of communication as if expecting that nothing will be obtained either from friend or foe at the front ; and, at the same time, to organize the requisitioning of supplies at the front against the danger that the army may be completely severed from its base. In practice, however, in recent years, everything has been sent up from the base.

In von Kluck's army, indeed, in which, during the march on Paris the men were often on the verge of starvation, a wagon-corps was created for the purpose of impounding and distributing supplies, and did some useful work. But such action was rare. In the deep German penetrations in 1918, no organized attempt of this kind was made and, though the German attacks petered out almost as much from the lack of ammunition as on account of Allied resistance, practically no use was made of the immense numbers of captured weapons and projectiles.

The system of supply from the base seemed perfect from the point of view of administration, especially where all communications were covered by heavily fortified zones whose flanks could not be turned. But it imposed a marked restraint on imaginative strategy. In the first world war, for example, hardly an enterprise was undertaken until full provision had been made for the initial blow ; and so great were the preparations necessary for rendering that blow effective that, in France, at any rate, the administrative range of the striking army but seldom extended beyond the Green or other line which formed the furthest of the limited

objectives under attack. For a deeper advance, all the vast preliminaries to the assault had to be renewed, and the resulting delay afforded the enemy, now fully on the alert, the time necessary for bringing up his reserves and digging fresh positions. No attempt was ever made, except occasionally by small parties, to continue the momentum of the initial attack by the use of the enemy's equipment and supplies.

On the other hand, in the present war, the German mechanized forces in France owed much of their success to the use they made of captured petrol—both in large tanks and roadside pumps. The result was the attainment of a degree of mobility that upset all calculations and was a leading factor in causing the collapse of the French army.

Wavell's hopes of success and of capturing enough stores to enable him to take up the pursuit were justified. In spite of the immense work entailed in the collection of prisoners and in clearing the battlefield, he managed to push forward a sufficiency of troops, adequately supplied, to keep the beaten enemy on the move.

Apart, however, from the use of captured stores, the effectiveness of the pursuit after Sidi Barrani is worthy of note. Pursuits always seem the natural corollary to victory; and so they should be, if due rewards are to be reaped. But, in fact, they are rare. Jena, Waterloo—Napoleon pursuing and pursued—are landmarks in history.

An extreme example of the common attitude towards pursuit is that afforded by Rennenkampf who, on finding that he had defeated von Prittwitz at Gumbinnen at the opening of the East Prussian campaign in 1914, remarked to his Chief of Staff: 'Well, thank God for that. Now we can go to bed.'



FIGHTING FOR FREE FRANCE—THE FAMOUS SPAHIS

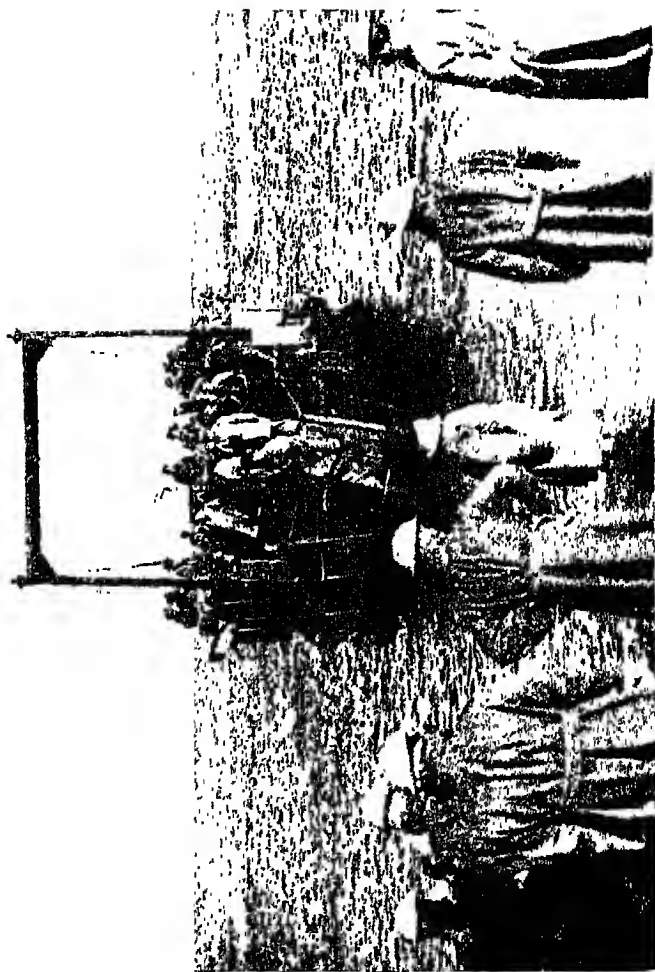




MODERN SHIPS OF THE DESERT—BRITISH HEAVY TANKS



FORTY ITALIAN TANKS CAPTURED AT SIDI BARRANI



A STORES TENDER AT SIDI BARRANI

Our Field Service Regulations say on this subject that : ' To organize and carry out a successful pursuit is one of the most difficult operations of war. Besides the physical exhaustion and disorganization of the troops at the end of the battle and administrative difficulties such as the repairing of communications, replenishing ammunition, and bringing up supplies, there is a mental reaction to be overcome which tends to affect all who have taken part in the battle.'

To transform into active pursuit the inertia that has thus fallen on troops and leaders alike, requires two things : the one, tremendous drive on the part of the commander ; and the other, for successful pursuits do not grow of themselves, careful previous organization.

One last comment on a battle that will go down to history as one of far-reaching results and rich in military skill. It is that Wavell, in spite of the overwhelming nature of his victory, which must have equalled his highest hopes, did not allow himself to be surprised either by his success or by its extent. Instead, he instantly drew the greatest profit therefrom. Again, such action seems easy and natural. That, however, is the case with the execution of all great artists, but not with performers of a lower order. When, by magnificent work in almost every sphere, we made the 8th of August, 1918, ' a black day ' for Germany, we should, had we only organized our attack so that we might have been enabled thereby to exploit the best possible result, have won so great a victory that it would have appreciably shortened the war. Fortunately, however, when we made things black for Graziani on the 9th of December, we were fully ready for the fresh tasks imposed by the victory

and proceeded without delay to make matters blacker for him with each day that passed.

A word in conclusion must be said in praise of the nameless staff. Each branch had its triumphs. To the General Staff—the approach-march by night over the desert, the timing of the attack, and the turning movement, and the organization of the pursuit ; to the Administrative Staff—the transportation of the force and its supply, the collection of prisoners and the quick utilization of captured material.

Everywhere, whether in the collaboration of the three fighting services, or in the combination between commanders and staffs, or in the mutual confidence between leaders and led, there was remarkable display of a team-spirit that made of Sidi Barrani a type of victory pre-eminently British.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FALL OF THE BASTION

THE ARMY OF THE NILE WAS NO LONGER justifying its name. Where it crossed the border into Libya, 'Old Man River' was flowing to the sea over 300 miles behind it. It was, however, entering a country which differed in its eastern district in no way from the deserts just traversed. Not until the Jebel al Ahkdar was reached, 150 miles farther on, would there be a change of scenery. Meanwhile, bitter winds, blinding dust-storms, and occasional torrents of rain would be the accompaniment of the march.

Libya is an immense country, its greatest length from east to west and its greatest depth from north to south being in each case over 900 miles—distances equal to those from London to Naples or from Berlin to Barcelona. The population numbers only about 900,000, of which nearly 90,000 are Italians and nearly 800,000 Moslems—Arabs and Berbers. Libya was snatched by Italy from the Turks in 1911 without the shadow of an excuse. The crime has, however, afforded the robber but little profit.

The country, which falls naturally into two well-defined parts—Cyrenaica in the east and Tripolitania in the west—is largely desert. It is cultivable mainly in two regions, the promontory of Cyrenaica, west and south of Derna, and a semicircular area having a radius of about 100 miles centred on

Tripoli—the capital of the province. In addition there are a number of widely dispersed fertile oases.

The colony, in spite of considerable development effected by the new owners, is by no means self-supporting. In some years as much as 75 per cent of its total budget has had to be paid from the Italian exchequer, and it has even to import a large proportion of its food. Its chief interest to us, perhaps, had hitherto lain in the attempt made at peopling it with Italians. This was done ostensibly to afford an outlet for Italy's rapidly increasing population. Of that many-sided problem it could, however, touch only the fringe. Its real object was military: first, to assist in rendering the Italian Empire independent of external sources of supply; and, secondly, to create a base of operations, on the one flank against Tunisia, where the Italians outnumber the French and which is admirably situated to complete strategic control for Italy over the central Mediterranean, and, on the other flank, against Egypt and her riches.

For many years, colonization proceeded very slowly; and it was not until 1938 that the first serious step was taken to render it effective, 20,000 peasants sailing from Italy to new homes in the autumn of that year. The colonists were selected from rural districts and from men with large families. On arrival, they found at their disposal each a farm fully irrigated, complete with implements, and a house fully furnished, of all of which they might become the owners by the end of twenty-five years. The scheme was fathered in sympathetic fashion by Marshal Balbo—a great pro-consul—who, it will be remembered, met his death in suspicious circumstances early in the war. Unfortunately

for Italy, the *Duce*, in his lust for further conquests, has gone far to stifle the promising project in its infancy. Such as it was, the Army of the Nile had the opportunity of seeing it at work during the march through Cyrenaica.

The programme of British action in the first stage of the campaign had been—that, on the 7th of December the advance had begun ; on the 11th, the capture of Sidi Barrani had been completed ; on the 16th, Sollum and Fort Capuzzo had been taken and the Libyan border crossed sixty miles west of Sidi Barrani ; and on the 17th three more border forts—Sidi Omar, Musaid, and Shefferzen—had been stormed. On the 17th, too, advanced elements of the army had already reached Bardia, thirty miles beyond Sollum, and were beginning to hem in the garrison of that port.

Bardia is one of the two natural harbours in Italian North Africa, the other being Tobruk. Its capacity is small, but it was well equipped, and the Italians had spent three years in constructing its fortifications. Within those barriers was said to be a strong garrison which had been reinforced by the remnants of the divisions defeated at Sidi Barrani and Sollum.

Bardia was now proclaimed the next objective. As infantry and artillery arrived there, they took over and strengthened the thin line, which had been hitherto held by the armoured division, confronting the outer line of forts, while the latter, freed for more active work, sped westwards towards Tobruk.

For three weeks Bardia was bombarded from the sea, the land, and the air. The torrent of shell poured into the devoted town called forth but little response. In the words of the *communiqué* from



G.H.Q., Cairo, the garrison 'continued passively to await events.'

During the 1st and 2nd of January, there was a *crescendo* of bombardment, and, on the 3rd, the assault took place. 'Just after dawn Australian forces, supported by tanks, penetrated a sector of the defences.' That was all the first *communiqué* on the battle divulged. It was learned later that, by evening, the central defences had been carried to a depth of two miles on a frontage of nine miles, that the assaulting troops had displayed great dash and that 8,000 prisoners had been taken. By midday on the 5th, all resistance had ceased, and 45,000 prisoners, including six senior generals, were in our hands. Bardia, proclaimed by Mussolini the Bastion of Fascism, had fallen.

Such is the bald record of a brilliant victory, won, like that at Sidi Barrani, at an absurdly low cost—on this occasion, of 600 casualties.

Although results of the battle were at once strikingly apparent to the world, reports are still fragmentary and difficult to reconcile one with another in the absence of good maps. The Italians appear to have erected a high and wide wire-fence, nearly forty miles long, to cover the whole outer perimeter and, immediately behind it, a deep and continuous tank-trap, 4 feet deep and 12 feet wide—a work of immense labour. During the siege, patrols, consisting of Australian sappers and infantry and British tank officers, reconnoitred this obstacle for the best points of entry. Crossing-places were chosen where the drifting sand of the desert had partially filled the trench, and plans were thereupon sketched out for the forcing of a passage by the tanks at these points. The sappers and infantry were to cut the wire, the sappers, covered by the

fire of the infantry's automatics, were to jump into the ditch, complete with tools and materials, and prepare a crossing and, when all was ready, the tanks were to crash through. Meticulous measurements and bearings were taken and no detail, however small, that could contribute to the success of the undertaking, was neglected. Most noteworthy is all this careful co-operation in the preparation of an assault by tanks. It is, indeed, vital for success, and it has been a striking feature in German tactics. The actual execution of the plan under fire was a ticklish affair ; and, in the process, most of the casualties suffered during the day occurred. The result, however, was a quick success according to plan.

Inside the outer perimeter there were a number of sectors also surrounded by wire and each containing three or four strong-points armed with machine-guns and anti-tank weapons and, in some cases, assisted by one or two *autocaretti* employed as flame-throwers. These points were joined to one another by heavily-concreted subterranean passages which were used both for purposes of communication and as shelters against bombs and shells. The works from the engineering point of view were excellent ; on the tactical side they were faulty, for they were purely defensive and protective with no organization for counter-attacks. Nevertheless, such fortifications and armaments should have been equal to ensuring a determined resistance, but for the lack of spirit behind them. The contour of the battlefield, too, lent itself to resistance, for the ground was scored with deep and tortuous *wadis*, in which reserves for counter-attack might have been located or machine-guns skilfully arranged to impose caution on the assailants. But they were not used

tactically, but rather as convenient areas of origin for the construction of cavernous dug-outs immune from penetration even by the 15-inch shells of H.M.S. *Terror* or by the heaviest of R.A.F. bombs.

Once the tanks were across the tank-trap in a few places, the defences, having no depth, began to cave in all along the line. Where tanks were not available, sappers used the old device of the Bangalore torpedo to blast a passage for the infantry through the wire. Assisted one way or another, the attackers swept on. They passed through the south-western section of the defences, turned north across the deep Wadi al Gefani and then north-east to the little white-walled town of Bardia, which marked the completion of their task.

Except at the outset, the Italians showed but little stomach for the fight. For days past they had taken cover in caves from the terrific bombardment to which their forts had been subjected ; and they emerged from them only to surrender—in one instance to the number of 2,000. Many of them had already diligently packed suit-cases ready for their captivity with all the little oddments likely to be useful in a new sphere which seemed to offer them much higher attractions than a further residence in Libya. Berganzoli of the ‘electric whiskers,’ the celebrated Blackshirt commander, had also packed his bag ; but he managed to escape with it early in the fight, to Tobruk. Here is the Italian *communiqué* issued on the battle : ‘The Italian troops, during twenty-five days of siege, wrote sublime pages of heroism and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy.’ Thus is history written for home consumption.

Like Sidi Barrani, Bardia presented many tactical points of interest. Where a siege has lasted three



SOLLUM BAY



ESCORT TO PRISONERS AT BUQ BUQ

weeks, where the opposing troops are in close contact, and the bombardment has steadily risen to a peak in order to assist the assault, it would seem no easy matter to effect surprise. Nevertheless, the feat was accomplished.

The strategic flank lay to the north-west, for success in that quarter would cut off any hope of escape on the part of the garrison. To avoid the obvious, the fortress was not attacked from that direction, though the road to Tobruk was, of course, held, that duty being performed by the Free French forces.

Then, again, a barrage is usually the precursor to an assault upon the line of trenches on which it falls. *Ergo*, the barrage was put down on a line where no assault was intended ; and the actual cover for the assault (no doubt with a big safety margin) was provided by a naval bombardment which, having long been concentrated successively on various sectors of the defences, would disclose no secrets by the direction of its final crash. The result was that the few stout fighters among the defenders who were prepared to make a firm resistance were assembled in the wrong places.

Such are the minor stratagems of war. They play a big part only if elaborated with meticulous care ; and, as a rule, many should be prepared if a few are to prove successful. On this occasion, much credit was due to them, both on account of the ingenuity with which they were devised and the thoroughness with which they were executed. But, just as, in defence, it is not the wall, but the heart behind the wall, that counts ; so, in the assault, it is less the plan and the artifices that win success than the heart behind the bayonet. Here it was, more than anything else, the dash of the Australians

and their accompanying tanks that terrified the Italians into surrender.

Again at Bardia, as at Sidi Barrani, Wavell made play offensively with the high-stopping of the machine-gun. As already mentioned, by December 17th, the day after the capture of Sollum, advanced elements of the Armoured Division had already begun to place a barrier across the road from Bardia to Tobruk ; and, from that hour, the garrison was doomed. A few days later, and here is another interesting feature, they were relieved in their posts by infantry and, resuming their roving mission, were soon forty miles away on the road to Tobruk.

This is a manœuvre completely appropriate to the collaboration of armoured forces with both motorized and pedestrian infantry. Powerful mechanized units seize points of vantage, their tanks usually coming into action in hull-down positions on the ground won. Then the motorized infantry arrives. It is not in the van because, its vehicles being unarmoured, it does not fight on wheels. Its tasks are, first, following the armoured units, to take over the positions, thus allowing the tanks to push on ; and, secondly, to hold its ground until the arrival of the pedestrian infantry, by whom it is, in turn, relieved. Once the vantage-point is taken over by infantry, it becomes a pivot of manœuvre from which the armoured units operate until they seize another vantage-point, when the process is repeated. It is all a very pretty piece of tactics ; and we shall see a good deal of it in operation during the remainder of the campaign.

We may now turn to possible criticisms of the plan of battle. Brimful of knowledge after the event, it might seem to some that Bardia might have fallen if assaulted in the first week, in which

case the whole tempo of the operations would have been hastened by a second victory so quick upon the heels of the first.

This may be true ; but to commit an army to the attack of a fortress held by a greatly superior force without utilizing to the full the means of preparation available, might easily result in a heavy toll of casualties without the compensation of success. It is possible, however, that Wavell had fully sensed the weakness of the Italian morale and might have been ready to take risks on that account otherwise hardly justifiable ; and that what determined him to give his troops every chance of a bloodless victory by full-scale and lengthy bombardment, was the state of his mechanical vehicles.

From the outset his light tanks had been hard worked at reconnaissance and his heavy tanks had played the principal part in the opening battle. Since then the armoured division and the many vehicles belonging to the artillery and infantry had, for the most part in a storm of dust, which was continually infiltrating into the machinery, covered at least 160 miles either over shocking roads or over a desert of hummocks, sand-dunes, and scrub. Supply-vehicles, having to journey to and fro, had probably traversed even longer distances.

Now mechanical vehicles have very definite limits. Cavalry have been ridden for three days without water and sustained by the tiniest of grain rations ; and creaks among horses struggle along with amazing courage for days after they appear to be at the end of their tether. Tanks and lorries, on the other hand, will not move a yard without oil and water, and mechanical creaks remain resolutely immobile until the necessary repairs



have been effected. "The horse," said Murat to Napoleon, "has no patriotism." He always seems however, to possess far more of that quality than does the internal combustion engine.

A halt was therefore necessary so that mobile ordnance workshops might be brought up and the required repairs effected ; for, until the vehicles were fighting fit, further swift movements could not be undertaken. Moreover, it is unlikely that the required minimum of supplies for a fresh advance in strength could have been made available in less than a fortnight. There was, accordingly, no object in hurrying the capture of Bardia. There was time in plenty for preparation ; and the more thorough it was and the fiercer the bombardment, the fewer would be the casualties incurred on the day of assault.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that Wavell might have hemmed in Bardia with a semicircle of machine-guns and rushed the remainder of his army to Tobruk in order to bring about the downfall of that valuable seaport before the Italians should have recovered from the panic caused by the sudden and complete reversal of fortune that had befallen them at Sidi Barrani. But, against this suggestion, the argument for the need of repairs to, and provision for, mechanical vehicles also holds good. Armies, too, though their needs are not absolute as are those of engines, cannot be lifted and moved quite like pawns on a chessboard ; they are living bodies, requiring rest, refreshment, food, and water, to enable them to put forth their full powers. Finally, in this connection, the outer perimeter of the fortress was thirty-eight miles in length. Opposite so extensive a line, a large proportion of the available troops would have been

needed to contain the garrison ; and, therefore, to have sent the small remainder to fight a battle sixty miles away would have entailed a dispersion of force dangerous even against so inept a foe as the Italian.

In the two great battles, the fighting value of 94,000 men, forming seven divisions—three Regular, two Blackshirt, two Libyan—and a mechanized group, had been destroyed. Upwards of 84,000 men had been killed or captured and the remainder were in full flight, having lost most of their equipment. The army of invasion had, in fact, been annihilated. Graziani had lost well over one-third of his available force.

In addition to the great material gains, the double victory, together with the steady Greek advance, exercised a considerable moral effect both in Europe and the East and stiffened the resistance of those states beginning to bend an unwilling knee to the German Baal. An immediate practical result of victory was the use of the port of Bardia, which would be a great help in solving the refractory problem of supplying an army operating between 300 and 400 miles from its base and having at its service, apart from a railway 170 miles in length, only a single track hardly deserving, over a long stretch, of the name of road.

One of the curiosities of the campaign was the small size of the mechanized component of the Italian army. Prior to the war we had heard much of the Italian *Divisioni Celeri*. They were supposed to be numerous and to be possessed of high mobility and fire-power. Yet, out of 94,000 men, the mechanized group counted only 6,000 men. Its leader—the gallant Maletti—was killed far in advance of Sidi Barrani in a fort which contained

the 'flying group' intended to overrun Egypt. The fact, however, that the greater part of his command was captured, not at Sidi Barrani but at Bardia, suggests that emphasis in the first battle was placed rather on mobility rearwards than fire-power forwards.

The parts played by the navy and the air force in keeping free sea and sky during the weeks preceding the fall of Bardia were just as important and as necessary to success as were those played by them at the battle of Sidi Barrani. The navy bombarded and blockaded the besieged town, brought up supplies and water to Sollum, shipped many thousands of prisoners and kept the coast clear of marauding vessels. The R.A.F. photographed the fortifications and produced a mosaic on which the plan of attack was based. It bombed every aerodrome in Cyrenaica, destroyed numerous aircraft on the ground and prevented many others from ever leaving their aerodromes. Moreover, by attacking on sight every enemy machine that took the air, it enabled the navy and army to pursue the siege completely undisturbed by aerial attacks. Bardia was, in fact, like Sidi Barrani, a triumph of collaboration between the fighting forces, and the highest praise in this connection is accordingly due to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham and Air-Marshal Longmore, as well as to General Wavell.

## CHAPTER VII

### TOBRUK

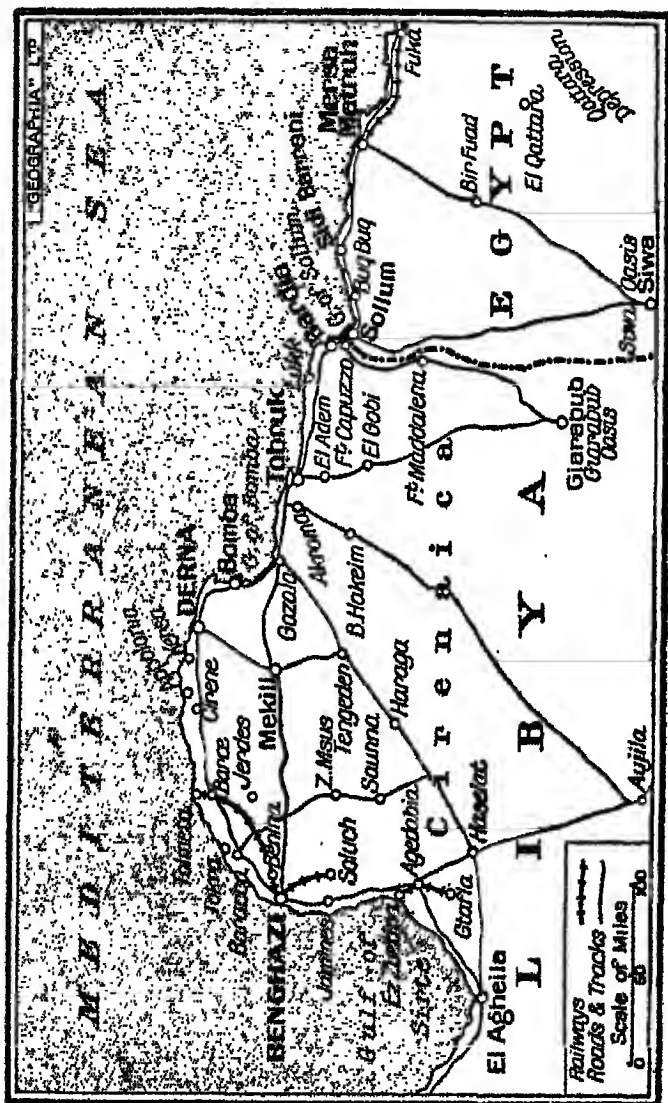
MUSSOLINI, WITH THAT APTITUDE which he shares with his Axis partner for counting his chickens before they are hatched, had built himself (or rather Balbo had built it for him) a 'Victory' road. Completed in 1937, it was a splendid piece of work redounding greatly to the credit of the Italian engineer. Through Tripoli, the capital, it runs, 1,140 miles in length, from frontier to frontier. In its triumphal progress, it swept all obstacles before it, clearing sand-dunes, bridging chasms, climbing plateaux. Following the coast, it united Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, long separated, into a single province. It did not need the florid fillip of the great commemorative arch set over it, for it was, of itself, an impressive monument to man's handiwork in the conquest of nature. And along it, in pomp, rode the Fascist Dictator proclaiming himself 'Protector of Islam'—he who had sponsored the cruel slaughter of the Senussi, that saintly people whose gospel was peace and goodwill.

It was built in the first instance for the strategic purpose of enabling troops to be despatched rapidly to either frontier: against France in Tunisia or against Britain in Egypt. But it is now vital to the existence of the colony, linking up, as it does, harbours, aerodromes, agricultural settlements and all other activities, civil and military.

It has, however, two military faults: the one (immaterial were the Mediterranean a Roman Lake, but dangerous with Britain in command of that sea) that, throughout its length, it is within range of naval gun-fire; the other that it is the only road and, therefore, peculiarly vulnerable to aerial attack.

It has another drawback, immanent in all roads. A road may be an invaluable strategic asset. It may provide the invader with the initiative, with the advantage in mobility and with superior weight of stroke. But it is a two-edged sword. If the tables are turned on the aggressor, all the benefits pass to his opponent. In this case that opponent is the British soldier; and he, after throwing back the invasion, is to be seen swinging happily in his lorry along the great highway and blessing Mussolini for providing so smooth and swift a passage to victory. And it is just as well that it should be the British soldier who gains the profit; for other folk might miss the humour of the situation and that he certainly will not. From this digression on an important matter, we may now return to the field of operations and see where the 'Victory' road will lead us.

Wavell did not sit still long to digest his triumphs. With him the campaign was no longer one of experiment and improvisation. Sidi Barrani and Bardia had provided him with materials for the continuation of the campaign and with practical tests of his theories, his army and his equipment. He was, therefore, working now with a sure touch, envisaging each move as a whole and ensuring for it proper sequence, direction, and range. And so quickly that, on the 6th of January, two days after the fall of Bardia, G.H.Q., Cairo, reported that,



on the previous day, advanced elements of our forces approaching Tobruk had occupied El Adhem—an Italian aerodrome lying twenty miles south of that town—and had captured there no less than eighty-seven enemy aircraft, most of which had been destroyed or rendered unserviceable by our bombing attacks. At the same time, the R.A.F. was reported to have made a heavy raid on the seaport. Then came two statements, one on the 8th, indicating considerable concentration in that direction and, one on the 9th, that mechanized troops had moved west of Tobruk.

Here we find a repetition of the tactics preceding the attack on Bardia, except that no pursuit led up to the battle of Tobruk because, the garrison of Bardia having all been captured, there was naught to pursue. The procedure in the new operation was : first, the pinning of the enemy to his ground by the lighter mechanized elements ; then the arrival of the remainder of the armoured division to confirm this tenuous hold ; then relief by marching divisions ; and, finally, during the 8th and 9th, the departure westwards of the armoured division in search of fresh adventures.

The objective was important because of its harbour, which lies in a rocky inlet two and a half miles long by three-quarters of a mile wide. It is the best natural harbour on the Libyan coast, and had been well developed by the Italians. Like Bardia, it was mainly an invasion-port, intended for the day when the Fascist navy should rule the sea and the Fascist army march in triumph through Egypt. For trade purposes, it had no serious value, for the desert extends from it to the south for over a thousand miles, to the east for 300 miles and to the west, to the edge of the Barka tableland, for

100 miles. It was strongly fortified, much in the same fashion as Bardia, with wire, anti-tank mine-fields and tank-traps on the perimeter, and an outer and inner line of forts. It possessed an armament of 200 guns of calibres running up to 6-inch and a large supply of ammunition. Since the fall of Sidi Barrani, work on the improvement of its defences had been feverishly pursued.

The garrison consisted of one division, part of another and detachments of sailors and coast-gunners. Of its numbers we are in no doubt, for every man went into the bag and the count showed 25,000. That is, all except one: for Berganzoli, of the electric whiskers, again managed to effect his escape.

From the 9th, for a period of twelve days, G.H.Q., Cairo, with a reticence in keeping with the character of its chief, remained completely silent on the progress of the operations. Then, on the 21st, it informed the world that, after very heavy bombing by the R.A.F. during the two preceding nights, penetration of the outer and inner defences had been effected to a depth of five miles and that many prisoners, including one general, had been captured. The attack had started before dawn on the 20th, and went on continuously for thirty hours. A *communiqué*, issued on the 22nd, showed that the depth of penetration had been increased to eight miles and that the forward troops were in position overlooking the harbour at a distance of about three miles from the town.

At nightfall, since many of the hostile batteries were still active, a halt was made preparatory to a final advance. On the following day, as the infantry columns were converging on the town, some Australians, moving ahead, broke unopposed.



into the main square, whereupon the enemy poured forth from every nook and cranny to surrender. As at Bardia, he had packed his suitcase in eager anticipation of a pleasant captivity. And his captors were quick to remark that he seemed to have lined up with the Hun rather than with Britain because he preferred a comfortable imprisonment to the savageries of the concentration camp.

When war correspondents entered the town shortly afterwards, they beheld a strange and striking scene. In the main square, on top of the flagstaff, in lieu of the Italian flag, an Australian slouch hat. Below, an Italian admiral, immaculate in naval uniform and white gloves, smoking a fat cigar and superintending the collection of a large array of luggage which he hoped to be allowed to take with him into captivity. Italians everywhere proclaiming how they had always hated the thought of fighting against England and begging to be herded into the next group of prisoners. The great cruiser, *San Giorgio*, and a number of military storehouses, burning fiercely. Oil-tanks also on fire, belching forth black smoke and a horrid smell. The harbour, full of wrecks of ships sunk by R.A.F. raids, in which, too, the town, with its whitewashed houses and defensive works, had been severely battered. A huge park of motor vehicles, largely consisting of 10-ton, solid-tyred lorries which, having done even time, Sidi Barrani to Tobruk, were sorely in need of repair. Italian wounded, which reached the figure of 2,000, being everywhere evacuated. In short, what, in peace days, had been a pleasant little seaport, had been transformed into a picture of the day of judgment.

"What," said the Rome radio on the following

day, in commenting on the defeat, "do a few stretches of desert matter compared with the gradual weakening of the British forces?" The desert (and there was plenty of it) did indeed not matter. But of great value was the harbour itself, pocket-size indeed, but equal, when cleared, to the reception of cruisers of 8,000 tons, and beyond price as a supply-base. Most useful, too, were the workshops, the aerodrome, and the immense stores of food, oil, and vehicles which had escaped destruction and which, from the moment of our entry into the town, were being sorted, catalogued, and distributed for the immediate supply of columns already fretting to continue the forward move.

To the Australians—worthy heirs to a magnificent tradition—the principal rôle had been again assigned ; and right well they carried it out. Their loss amounted to less than 300 ; and the total casualties suffered from an operation in which the captures included four generals, an admiral, 50 tanks and 200 guns did not exceed 500. It is interesting to compare this figure with the losses, sometimes 500 men in as many seconds, we suffered when fighting against the valiant but, compared with the Italian, ill-armed Turk in Mesopotamia under conditions of terrain very similar to those prevalent in Libya.

As at Sidi Barrani and Bardia, success had been due largely to the intimate co-operation of the fighting forces. In principle, however, whereas it is the part of a navy and an air force to render victory possible, it is that of the army to strike the final blow and occupy the hostile country. Thus it is that, when army, navy, and air force are engaged in combined operations, attention is focussed on the army rather to the exclusion of the other services.

In fulfilling its tasks, the army aims at definite and sequent objectives and, in pursuance of that strategy, which is usually one of long range, it is affected by a number of factors, human and material, such as morale, relative numbers, topography, climate, and supply. The resulting actions receive wide notice in the Press for they possess all the features of a drama of absorbing interest.

It is otherwise, however, with a fleet and an air force. A fleet, though it battles as such but rarely, is always in action, silent, pervasive, and, in its devotion to duty, unremitting. After Trafalgar, Collingwood rode the seas for ten years. His were 'those far-distant and storm-beaten ships upon which the Grand Army never looked,' but which 'stood between it and the dominion of the world.' And his the ships, too, which maintained the British army in Spain for the long years during which it slowly climbed to its triumph. In their innermost hearts, the people of England knew what they owed to their sailors and prided themselves to the full on their achievements ; but they read no daily catalogue of their actions, of forced marches, fierce assaults, victorious pursuits. So it is to-day as regards naval duties in the North Sea, in the Western Approaches to Britain and in the Mediterranean. To Wavell, the services of the fleet, freely rendered, were vital ; but, in the story of his successes, they were never front-page news.

The aid of an air force is vital also. The Army of the Nile might have failed miserably at Sidi Barrani, had mastery of the air lain with the enemy. Its concentration and deployment could never have been hid ; and, without surprise, it would have been shorn of its most potent weapon. Similarly with the other battles. It was largely because enemy

aircraft were but seldom permitted to leave the ground and were heavily punished whenever found in the air, that the army was enabled to attain its aims with such precision and finality. Ordinarily, however (the battle over Britain was a notable exception), the collective achievements of an air force do not make exciting reading, largely because there is so much sameness about them. The squadrons raid, they bomb, they cause explosions, they set ships on fire, they machine-gun lorries. It is all magnificent work ; but, as they repeat it again and again, and as the effect is cumulative rather than quickly decisive, interest in their performances tends to flag.

The individual deeds of airmen fall into a different category. They are knightly exploits of a chivalry surpassing in skill and daring that, whether real or legendary, of other ages. But space and paper-restrictions forbid a catalogue of their separate deeds. Hence it is that an air force, like a navy, may not receive its full meed of public notice. Nevertheless, the R.A.F., like the navy, may feel sure that this is a matter of mere external significance. For, deep in the heart of the nation, are enshrined the gallant feats and the unshrinking sacrifices of its treasured youth. When the young airman is in doubt let him take to his heart the memorable words of the Prime Minister : " Never, in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few."

In the first three battles of his campaign, Wavell had captured 100,000 prisoners and an immense booty of useful war-material. His own losses, in almost incredible disproportion, figured less than 1,500. These triumphs had been achieved, not, as with Nazi successes, against a nation lulled into

a false sense of security by specious promises and then surprised by a sudden treacherous irruption, but against one which had been preparing for this particular war of aggression for five years and which had, in order to make sure of success, sent to Libya her most trusted leader and the pick of her army. The British victory, in fact, had been won, not stolen.

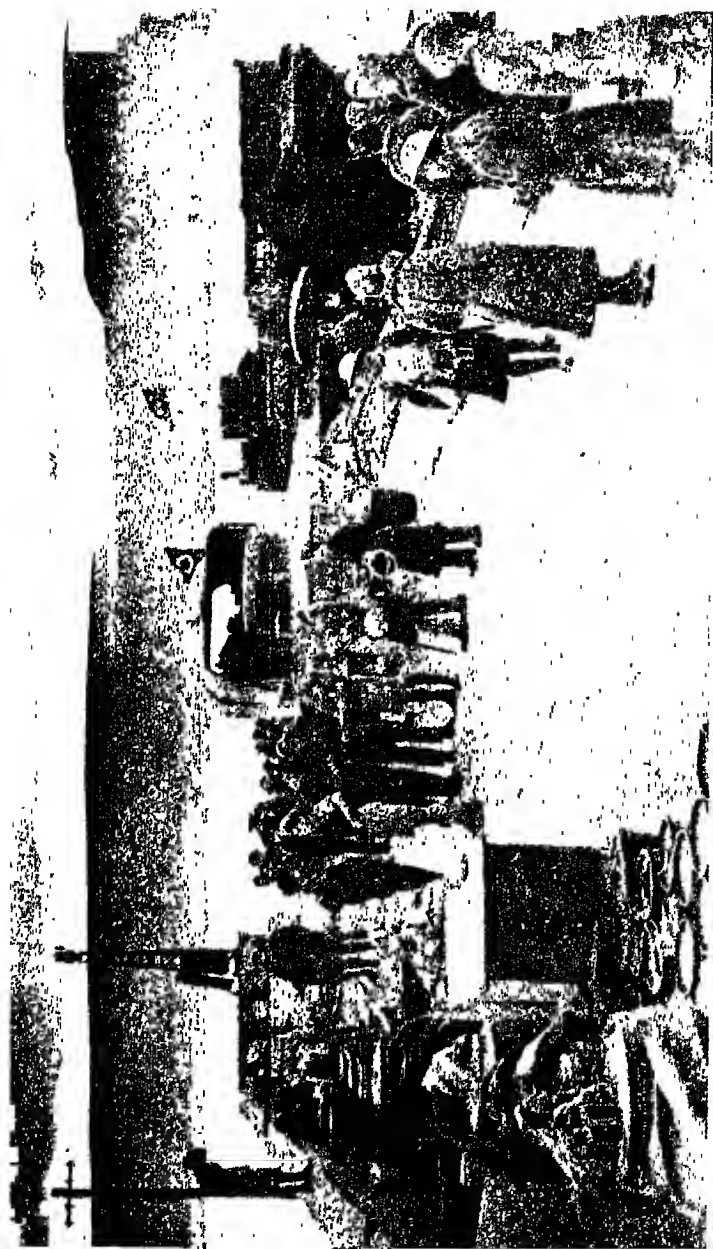
Its psychological effect over the whole theatre of the world war was past measurement. Through the gloom of a long succession of melancholy events connected with Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Dunkirk, France, Dakar, British Somaliland, Rumania, only two rays of sunshine had hitherto managed to penetrate—one the splendid victory of our 'fighters' over Britain—a victory whose tremendous significance had not been widely understood; and the other, the glorious resistance and *riposte* of the Greeks. Comforting as were these rays, however, they could not remove the world-wide depression caused by Nazi successes nor raise drooping and fearsome nations to place hope in the future or to face the campaigns of intimidation continually launched against them.

The combined effect of Wavell's victories and of the epic of Taranto was electrifying to the peoples of both east and west. Here, clearly, was no mere flash in the pan, but a display of the innate might of the British Empire at last getting into its stride. Here was no occasional ray of light, but a powerful sun burning through and dissolving the mists of despair. Wherever men feared imprisonment of soul, hope and courage were reviving.

Another valuable outcome of the British and Greek victories was that they had robbed Hitler of the initiative which for years past had been his



BREN GUN CARRIERS AT FORT CAPUZZO



THE PORT OF SOLIUM

most treasured possession. However much it might go against the grain to alter, discard, or postpone such plans as the invasion of Russia as he may have been hatching, it was impossible for him, in the interests of the Axis, to allow his partner to be destroyed without making an effort to save him. It was likely, therefore, that he would have to despatch aircraft, and perhaps troops, to Southern Italy and Sicily, and that he might be compelled to stage marches through Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, though knowing full well that, for his ultimate purpose of crushing the British Empire, those were but secondary theatres.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### DERNA, BENGHAZI, AND SOLLUK

AS THE FALL OF TOBRUK BECAME imminent, Wavell had an important decision to make. Cyrenaica pushes to the north a great promontory which is rendered fertile by the rains of the Mediterranean and can, therefore, support along its coasts a number of important towns—Derna, Apollonia, and the capital, Benghazi. In the centre, just south of the coastal belt, rises a double-stepped plateau known as the Jebel el Akhdar, or Green Mountain, a productive area farmed by many of the Italian colonists. The base of the hump lies between Tobruk on the north-east and El Agheila, nearly 300 miles away, on the south-west. In this theatre, as elsewhere, the 'Victory' road follows the coast. There is also a track running from Tobruk westwards through Mekili to Benghazi, passable by motor traffic, easily as far as Mekili, but only with difficulty beyond that point. From this track it is possible to branch off at Mekili to the south-western corner of the promontory. If Wavell should be able to reach Jedabia (Agedabia) or El Agheila by this route, he would cut off all enemy troops in Cyrenaica. The supply of the whole army by the barren Mekili route which lies south of the Jebel would, however, if not impossible, at least demand immense and lengthy preparations. It would entail leaving the sea and the ever-present, ever-ready help of the

navy. Finally, on arrival at Jedabia, it might easily be found, especially as each town was to a great extent dependent on local supplies and on its own accumulated reserves, and not on the main base at Tripoli, that the various garrisons, instead of being shocked into surrender by the appearance of a force across their communications with Tripolitania, might remain stolidly at their posts, in which case the army would be in a difficult, if not absurd, position. There being no ports from which it could be fed by sea within 200 miles of Jedabia, it would be compelled, in order to regain its communications, either to retrace its steps via Mekili, or fight its way back along the coast. In either case it would be faced with an extremely dangerous supply situation.

Thus the move of the whole army by the Mekili route would be clearly unsound. But there were fewer objections by far to the despatch, by that route, of a flying column of mechanized forces intended to co-operate eventually with the main body which would march along the coast. The stroke could be carried out either from Tobruk or from any of the coastal towns, which, as far as Apollonia—the port of Cyrene—all connected with Mekili. By careful timing and by the tactics adopted in the opening battle of the campaign, it should prove feasible to combine an attack by the main body from the north on Benghazi with the action of the flying column, which would come up from the south and place a barrier of fire-power, much as was done between Sidi Barrani and Buq Buq, across the enemy's only possible line of retreat.

That, in short, was the decision adopted. On paper, it looked a peculiarly attractive plan. It remained to be seen if the armoured division would

prove equal to the desert journey and, if so, could the obvious difficulty of accurate timing be overcome? If the flying column were to arrive too early, it might easily be overwhelmed; too late, and the enemy might escape. Clearly it would be a ticklish operation, in which much would depend on the constitution and handling of the mechanized forces employed.

Tobruk had hardly fallen, before the besiegers were again on the move westwards. In fact so little rest was allowed (or desired) that, by the evening of the 24th of January—that is, only two and a half days after the capture of the seaport, our vanguard, which had participated in the capture, was in contact with the enemy about three miles from Derna, having, in that short period, covered 110 miles and having occupied the enemy seaplane base of Bomba *en route*.

The town of Derna lies on the shore, and, behind it, rises a steep escarpment on which there was a semicircle of ancient forts, strongly held. The Italian garrison, having heard of the fate of their comrades in Bardia and Tobruk, attempted indeed to defend the town, but took care at the same time to ensure a line of retreat for themselves. Their problem was rendered easily soluble by the lie of the Wadi Derna, a precipitous ravine running due south from the town and cutting through the centre of the row of forts. They were thus enabled to put up a much better fight than any enemy troops previously encountered; with the result that, not until the morning of January 29th, by which date our advanced forces had been considerably strengthened, was the town captured. Even then most of the garrison, fighting a stout rearguard action in a country admirably suited for such tactics,

effected a successful withdrawal. This was the only occasion in the campaign on which an enemy force under attack succeeded in escaping complete destruction. It is, therefore, worth noting that it was also the only occasion on which mechanized forces, having, as it will be seen, other duties to perform at the time, did not place a barrier of quick-firing weapons astride the enemy's line of retreat either before or during the battle.

The little town of Derna, with its 10,000 inhabitants, lies on the edge of the fertile area and presents a sudden and complete contrast with the stretch of 300 miles of parched desert of sand and scrub over which our troops had been marching and fighting since leaving Mersa Matruh. The Australian troops were still in the van and, as they first entered the town, it seemed to them a pocket-paradise with its gardens, its running water, its clean streets, and white houses. The Italian colonists had indeed made of it a home from home ; and, fortunately for its appearance, it had not been seriously damaged by bombardment.

The army, now entering the mountainous area, maintained contact with the enemy as he retreated. On the 4th of February, Cyrene, sixty miles to the west of Derna, was captured, the time taken indicating in the pace of progress a slowing-down, which was due partly to the intricate nature of the country and partly to the more stubborn resistance of the enemy.

Only two days after the capture of Cyrene, Benghazi, the largest and most populous town in Cyrenaica, fell into our hands. Actually, it is not a fortress in the sense that Bardia is a fortress ; but a large body of troops was quartered in barracks there. Hearing of the succession of victories won

by the British forces and the remorseless pressure the latter were exercising, General Tellera, commanding the garrison, decided to abandon the capital without a fight and endeavour to reach Tripoli, 550 miles away. When the Australians entered the town, therefore, after having, since leaving Cyrene, travelled at the rate of fifty miles a day, they met with no resistance.

In the meantime, the boldest and most exciting stroke of the campaign had been executed. While, after the fall of Tobruk, the bulk of the Army of the Nile was pursuing its victorious career along the littoral road, the mechanized cavalry regiments, R.H.A., and motor-infantry of the armoured division were concentrating towards Mekili, which lies about 110 miles east of Benghazi and some 70 miles south of the coast at Apollonia.

Looking at the map, Mekili gives the impression of a Libyan Charing Cross—a place where many highways meet. Actually, it is an important junction, not of macadam roads, but of tracks which are barely visible by day and which even the nomad Arabs have difficulty in following. It was from this point that the operation for severing the communications of the garrison of Benghazi was to start.

The light tanks, moving from Tobruk, defeated an Italian force at Mekili on the 26th and 27th of January and then awaited the order to advance. They started thence at 9 p.m. on the 2nd of February, that is, while the main body was still on the road between Derna and Cyrene.

As usual, when anything important was on foot, a fierce gale, with its concomitant dust-storm, sprang up at the critical moment. Visibility was consequently almost nil throughout the journey, and

direction had therefore to be maintained by compass. To add to the difficulties of the troops, the wind was in their faces and bitterly cold and, water being scarce and its transport on a large scale an impediment to rapid movement, the ration per man had to be reduced to one glass a day for all purposes. Moreover, the need for reaching the coast with all speed allowed but the shortest of halts for rest, food and the inspection of vehicles. The going, too, was of the worst, the bumps over outcrops of rock indescribable. Even over the best of roads in perfect light, no tank can be called a comfortable conveyance. In closed columns at night, what with cold, darkness, dust and shocks, each tank must have seemed a travelling purgatory. The march was, therefore, the most difficult imaginable. Nevertheless, it was carried through and the coast reached somewhere between Solluk and Jedabia in thirty-six hours—an achievement reflecting credit on all concerned—on commanders for leadership, on staffs for organization, and on troops for endurance and fine driving.

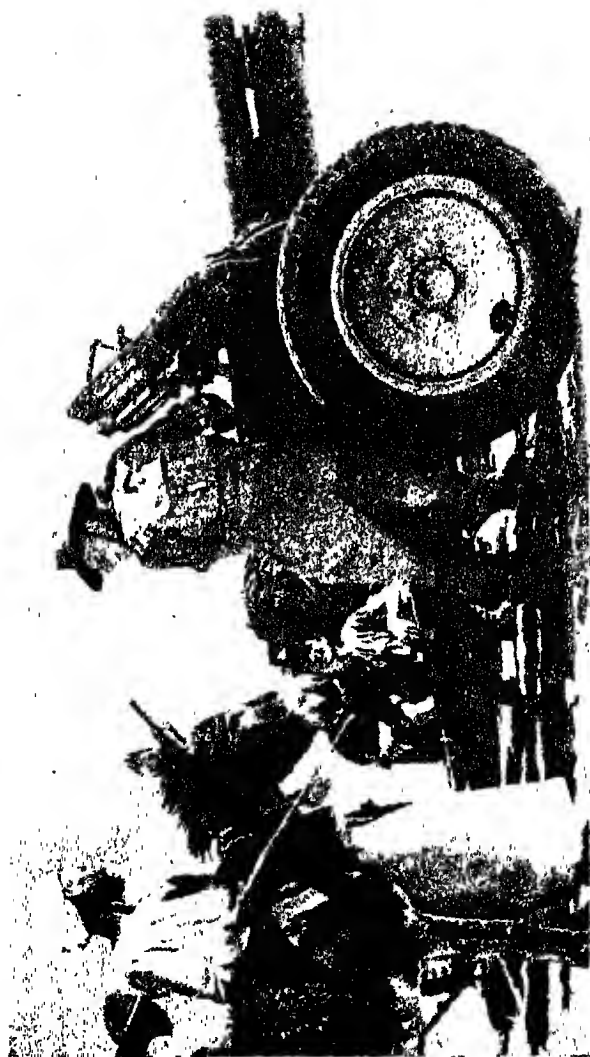
The head of the column arrived in the nick of time. General Tellera, realizing the speed with which the main body of our army was advancing from Cyrene, made a dash for liberty in the small hours of the 5th of February. In the course of the morning, his leading troops collided with our light tanks ; and, from then onwards, the battle raged for two days as more and more of the opposing forces came into action.

The Italians had allowed themselves once again to be surprised. Although some of their troops had been engaged at Mekili on the 27th of January, and although the shape of the promontory and the position of Mekili alike suggested an operation of

the nature undertaken by the flying column, they considered it to be out of the question in the given conditions of time, space, and terrain. They were accordingly caught in the first instance in column of route on the road, that is, in the most vulnerable of formations. This was a fortunate circumstance for our mechanized cavalry, not only because it was enabled thereby to throw the head of the enemy column into disorder and to inflict heavy casualties upon it, but also because it saved the British from being outflanked at a time when its front across the vital road was perforce perilously narrow. Above all, the check inflicted on the enemy gained time for the arrival of the heavier vehicles of the armoured division.

The leading Italians encountered had consisted largely of light troops mixed up with civilian traffic, including passenger-buses, proceeding both ways, conditions which led to confusion and naturally militated against effective military action. On the following day, when the main fighting body containing seventy tanks arrived on the scene, the British were in a state of dangerous inferiority. They fought under this disadvantage until the late afternoon when the balance was redressed to a great extent by a reinforcement of cruiser tanks, which reached the battlefield from the north-east by a less difficult route than that traversed by their lighter brethren.

The battle did not reach its full development until midday on the 6th of February, by which time it had become a desperate struggle. The burden of attack was, of course, thrown upon the Italians, and they appear at first to have shouldered it manfully. The British tanks, however, as they came into the line, probably found excellent hull-



AUSTRALIAN GUNNERS WITH ABDUL AND HIS DONKEY





MOPPING-UP IN BARDIA



ITALIAN PRISONERS AFTER BARDIA



STAFF CAR ENTERS BARDIA

down positions among the hummocks, in which they would be to a great extent concealed, and from which they could fire from steady platforms. On the other hand, their opponents had to advance fully exposed and with the value of their fire seriously diminished by lack of easily visible targets and by the rocking of their vehicles.

After the attack, a British counter was sprung on the weakened enemy. In it, a large number of his tanks were destroyed, thanks to the excellence of the gunnery training of the battalions of the Royal Tank Regiment engaged. The battle was, however, even then by no means over. On the following morning, Tellera made a final effort to break through. The British tanks had been fighting for the most part facing west and north-west, and, south of them, the task of barring the vital coastal road against the enemy's retreat had been entrusted to two motorised battalions of infantry, supported by a single anti-tank battery. Against this slender force, slender that is for anti-tank work, twenty-six Italian tanks were launched. At once the situation became perilous and a break-through appeared inevitable. The anti-tank battery, however, in spite of heavy losses, did some splendid shooting and actually knocked out eighteen of the enemy vehicles; whereupon the remaining eight surrendered. The gunners had been finely supported by their infantry comrades and the two together made a notable contribution to the British victory. With this gallant feat, the battle came to a close. Tellera was among the casualties, mortally wounded. He had made a gallant effort and had failed. Such is the fortune of war.

Shortly afterwards, white flags were to be seen fluttering from every enemy vehicle, and the whole

Italian force surrendered. Hardly a tank, hardly a lorry had escaped. The victory, in fact, was as complete as its predecessors, captures totalling approximately 21,000 prisoners, 125 guns, and 94 tanks. A grateful nation will surely applaud the conception and the execution of this master-stroke, the gallant fighting of the armoured division, and more than anything, perhaps, the unshaken endurance by the troops of one of the most difficult marches on record, followed by forty-eight hours of almost incessant fighting, in which the pressure of the enemy in superior numbers caused many anxious moments.

The full story of the battle of Solluk, illustrated by accurate maps, will be awaited with lively interest ; for, even from the somewhat meagre accounts that have yet reached us, it is clear that it will live as one of the most magical and inspiring achievements in our military history.

Towards the end of the engagement, an Australian brigade group arrived hot-foot on the field. After seizing Benghazi, and finding the quarry flown, it had hurried southwards by forced marches to find the battle practically over. The timing of the combined operation had just missed perfection because the swift moves of the main body along the coastal road had frightened the Italian garrison into flight somewhat earlier than had been anticipated.

Among the prisoners was General Berganzoli with whiskers complete. After his escapes from Bardia to Tobruk and from Tobruk to Benghazi, he had become a legendary figure ; and a cable ' Berganzoli in the bag ' was accordingly despatched to Cairo.

Benghazi—the Berenice of the Ancients—was, of

course, the most important town in the province yet occupied—not only because it was the capital, had a good water supply and contained 65,000 inhabitants, but also because it was now a useful seaport having, by dredging and the building of breakwaters, been developed by the Italians from a mere open roadstead to a harbour equal to taking ships of 15-ft. draught alongside its quays. Yet another port of supply and another naval base for light craft had been made available for our forces.

The prizes of Solluk were two in number : the first, that the enemy was thrown back beyond profitable bombing-range of the Suez Canal, which was now 800 miles from our most westerly post ; and the second, the province of Cyrenaica. On February 8th, a detachment was sent to occupy El Agheila, a point on the coastal road close to the border of Tripolitania. With that key in our pocket, entry into Cyrenaica from the west appeared to be closed ; for, beyond it, the road ran for 300 miles towards Tripoli in a defile with the sea on one side and semi-desert on the other.

At once, arrangements were undertaken for the administration of the province, Sir Maitland Wilson, who had commanded the Army of the Nile with such unfailing skill in all its triumphs, being appointed Governor.

A word may be said here on the subject of our mechanical vehicles, which proved far superior to those of the Italians and whose excellence accounted to a large extent for the amazing mobility of the Army of the Nile, of which so many examples have been given. British dominance in this respect was largely due to exhaustive experiments which had been carried out from Cairo for many years past, by motor vehicles of all kinds over every variety

of terrain likely to be encountered in the desert. Two names in particular will be remembered in this connection—those of Major Bagnold and Major Paris, who acted as leaders of expeditions designed to make special tests. The most profitable discovery made was that of the value of special low-pressure over-size tyres. So equipped, armoured cars, patrol-trucks, and infantry trucks could make thirty-five miles per hour over sand in which an ordinary lorry might sink to the axle.

A striking example, of which slight mention has already been made, of the efficiency of British mechanization was given by groups of armoured fighting-vehicles which had been operating in the Libyan desert against the Italians ever since the early days of the war. At the end of the battle at Solluk, G.H.Q. disclosed the tale of their activities. These motor-commandos, known as 'The Long-range Desert Group,' and consisting of selected men from the Royal Armoured Corps and New Zealanders, had raided almost every oasis in Libya within a range of 1,200 miles from their base, and they had also joined in the adventure of the Free French forces which had operated from Lake Chad against Murzuk. Amazing as it may appear, they travelled 500,000 truck-miles with the loss of a single vehicle only. In their frequent forays, they seized posts, captured mails, obtained much valuable information and, above all, by throwing the enemy everywhere and always on the defensive, acquired a lasting moral superiority over him. The outstanding performance of our vehicles, whether over the sandy, hummocky desert of Libya or, as will be seen later, up the mountains of Abyssinia, or in the soggy jungles of Somaliland, indicates the important part played in modern war by invention

and workmanship. May the British heritage of brilliancy in the one line and thoroughness in the other, long endure !

The Royal Army Ordnance Corps deserves high praise in this connection. It was responsible through its workshops and mechanics for the maintenance of both the armoured division and all the motorized combatant services ; and the rapid rate at which the army moved furnished a sure indication of the efficiency with which that trust was fulfilled. It had always at hand the field-workshops<sup>1</sup> required to effect light repairs to what corresponds among motor vehicles to 'walking wounded,' and also the recovery-sections whose task it was to remove the lame ducks to larger workshops in rear.

The Royal Army Service Corps, too, merits a special tribute. In spite of the almost unparalleled speed of movement of the Army of the Nile, the Corps never failed : always it was there, as the march ended or the battle died down, with food, petrol, and ammunition. Whatever the obstacles to supply, it was a point of honour that they should be overcome ; and overcome they were. It passed the highest of known tests in affording complete satisfaction to the demands of the British soldier.

With the elimination of the Italian army of invasion, it may be well to review very briefly the conduct and the effect of the campaign. Battles do not stand out in history because of the vastness of the numbers engaged or even because of the quantities and nature of weapons employed, but rather by reason of the magnitude of the issues

<sup>1</sup>Known as Light Aid Detachments (L.A.D.). They consist of a break-down lorry, a mobile forge and a stores lorry, and are manned by one or two twelve or "T" . . .



involved and of the results achieved. Judged by these criteria the victory of Sidi Barrani will take high place. For, if we throw our minds back to the months preceding the battle and recall the dangers that then threatened and which Sidi Barrani dissipated, we see how perilous the Italian stroke, especially through its menace by land and air to the Suez Canal and the naval base at Alexandria, was to our hold upon the Middle East. Another point : we can win no war while the enemy continually calls the tune and we dance to his piping. Yet, until the 7th of December, the Axis leaders had dictated all our strategy. At Sidi Barrani we seized the initiative for the first time.

Again the unreadiness of our military machine, as exposed in Norway, in Belgium, in Somaliland, had, in spite of the magnificent performance of the R.A.F., given point to hostile propaganda as to British decadence. For the future, on that subject, neither Goebbels nor Gayda was likely to obtain a hearing. The events themselves were 'on the air,' and listeners-in, alike in east and west, were greedily absorbing the tale of British prowess with its promise of escape from existing or impending thrall.

Sidi Barrani will also remain famous as a masterpiece of the military art, both in conception and execution. For rarely, in a single battle, have so many of the aids to victory been harnessed to a triumphal car. Here is the record and it is worth noting : the achievement of surprise, where surprise seemed barely feasible ; the exploitation for tactical use of the maximum value of weapons ; economy of life ; the utilization of captured material ; the unremitting pursuit, and, finally, the co-operation of the forces by sea, land, and air—all rendered possible by flawless administration.

The principles followed in the early battle were pursued with variants in its successors. To name three points only : the first that, though there was no change in instruments employed, surprise was attained in three out of four of the battles ; the second that speed of stroke mounted steadily to a climax at Solluk ; and the third that, in every major battle, owing to a skilful combination of mobility with fire-power, the whole enemy army went into the bag.

In all 150,000 prisoners were taken against British losses in killed, wounded, and missing of less than 1,700—a figure which, in comparison, looks negligible. Well may the Army of the Nile be proud of its performance, and well may it be grateful to a navy and air force which had enabled it to achieve such results.

The main question posed at the close of this stage of the campaign was whether the Army of the Nile was to rest on its laurels content with the conquest of Cyrenaica and the benefits it had obtained therefrom, or to advance into Tripolitania, destroy what remained of the Italian army and occupy the whole colony. It may be of interest to note what the author wrote on the subject before a decision was reached upon it.

‘ The reasons that may be advanced in favour of an immediate continuation of our advance in Libya are for the most part obvious. They are :

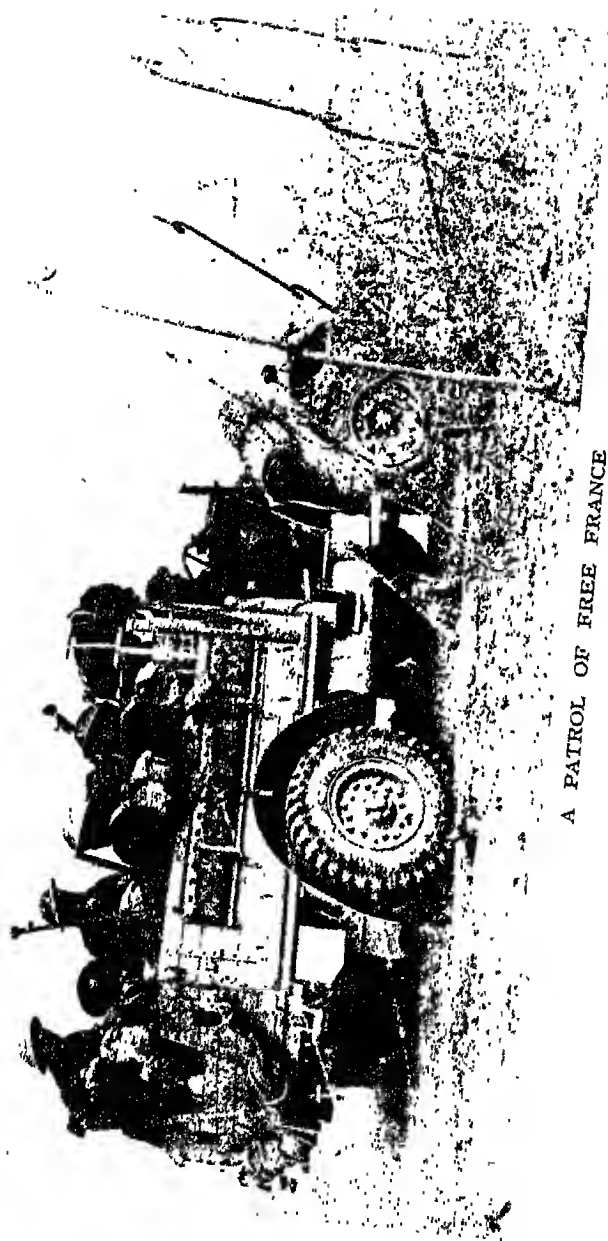
A. The enemy’s morale has been shattered. It is almost certain that in any action with him in the near future, the proven skill of our commanders, the courage and endurance of our men and the excellence of our equipment, will bring us victory. On the other hand, if we allow the enemy to recoup, to make further preparations based on the

lessons he has learned from defeat and to receive reinforcements, there may be no easy triumphs in future combats.

Moreover, the Army of the Nile stands in full strength ready and eager for operation. Conditions may well change and cause its strength to be reduced below that necessary for the adventure. In a few weeks' time, too, the weather will become excessively hot for active military operations.

B. The actual operation presents no insuperable difficulty. For 300 miles beyond El Agheila, the littoral road, as already mentioned, runs in a defile between the sea on one flank and semi-desert on the other. Within that distance it is unlikely that the Italians would attempt to oppose our advance ; for, were they to do so, we should, with our command of the sea and our superiority in mechanized forces, be able to turn their flanks and cut across their line of retreat at will. Supply, indeed, would be no easy matter for us at this stage ; but, with the use of the ports of Cyrenaica and the command of the sea, it should not prove insuperable. At the end of the stage, we should be able to make fresh bases at Misurata and Homs on the road to Tripoli. An amphibious operation assisted by the action of an armoured force on land should not be excluded from consideration.

C. Once the whole of Libya is in our hands, the bulk of our forces—and this is the important matter—can be liberated for action in other theatres. For, so long as we exercise control over the eastern Mediterranean to the degree we do at present, no oversea expedition can be launched against us ; and the probability of a French attack on us from Tunisia is so slight that it may be ignored. It is possible, in fact, that, once we had excluded the



A PATROL OF FREE FRANCE



BRITISH FIELD-GUN, CAMOUFLAGED IN GUN-PIT

enemy from Libya, we might set free almost as many troops as if we were to occupy Cyrenaica alone.

D. By the capture of Tripoli, we strengthen both our naval and aerial position in the central and eastern Mediterranean, and may, thereby, either economize force or render it more effective. Aircraft at Tripoli would indeed have to fly nearly 300 miles to reach Sicily, but Malta could be used if required as a convenient stepping-stone either to Sicily or Southern Italy.

E. A British occupation of Tripolitania would greatly encourage the French army in North Africa, and would strengthen its position, thus safeguarding to some extent the important naval base at Bizerta.

F. The loss of Libya and its garrison, coupled perhaps with that of Abyssinia, might well prove decisive in overturning the Fascist regime in Italy.

G. British prestige, especially in the Near and Middle East, would be further enhanced.

The reasons for calling a halt at El Agheila are probably more evident to those behind the scenes than to the ordinary observer. They would seem to be :

A. The Germans are threatening Greece. It is of primary importance that we support our gallant ally, as we have promised to do, to the utmost of our power. Moreover, the strong country of Greece, with its mountains and its marshes, backed by our command of the sea, offers us a favourable opportunity, not otherwise obtainable at the moment, of measuring swords with our principal enemy.

B. The Germans are threatening Turkey, though not immediately. In the course of the recent staff-talks there, it is fairly certain that we promised her

help in the event of attack, not only by sea and air, but also by land. This is not a strong point, because an attack on Turkey would almost certainly bring in Russia against Germany, and Hitler has at the moment no wish to make so powerful an addition to his enemies or to rob himself of so considerable a source of supply.

C. Cyrenaica, covered on one flank by Egypt and on the other by the desert on the south of the Gulf of Sirte, should not require a large garrison.

The gist of the problem seems to lie in finding the correct solution of two questions :

The first—if we continue our operations in Libya, have we a reasonable expectation of bringing them to a successful conclusion before German action becomes dangerously effective against Greece? With this question is wrapped up another question: ‘Is it not possible that Germany has been strutting on the Bulgarian stage with a view to helping her Italian ally by compelling us to limit our commitments in Libya and that she has no wish for the moment, especially in view of Stalin’s doubtful attitude in connection with the occupation of Bulgaria, to undertake a major operation in Greece?’

The second : Should we require a garrison for the whole of Libya larger, to a degree worthy of consideration, than that required for Cyrenaica? If the answer should be in the affirmative, might we not employ second-line troops almost entirely in Libya and thus be able to release the veteran Army of the Nile for active operations elsewhere?

There are two strong indications that no further advance is intended at the moment : the one, the appointment of General Wilson, who has so successfully commanded the Army of the Nile, as Governor of Cyrenaica ; the other, the long pause

in operations on an occasion when time is clearly of the utmost importance.

The predilections of the author are entirely in favour of ousting the Italian at once from Libya. He realizes, however, that should two such daring and forceful leaders as the Prime Minister and the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East decide to call a halt, they would certainly have adequate reasons, of which the public may not be cognizant, for their decision.'



## CHAPTER IX

### THE WAR IN EAST AFRICA

**I**TALIAN EAST AFRICA CONSISTS OF Italy's old colonies of Eritrea and Somalia (Italian Somaliland) and of her recent conquest of Abyssinia. Eritrea is, racially and geographically, part and parcel of Abyssinia and may be conveniently included with it in a geographical description of the Italian possessions.

The core of Abyssinia consists of a great irregular plateau deeply gashed by rivers which drive fathomless gorges through it, for the most part on their way to the Nile. The plateau, which is between 6,000 and 8,000 feet high with a tilt to the west, is dominated by magistral ranges rising to 14,000 feet. These mountains and the numerous rifts formed by the rivers, make formidable military obstacles. The cañon of the Blue Nile, for instance, is in places 6,000 feet deep; the Takazze, which, during the rainy season, is said to carry as much water as the Thames at Greenwich, 2,000 feet deep. The contour of the plateau is also of military importance. Its eastern edge, which drops precipitously to the plain, runs from the A-shaped northern tip of Abyssinia, and, passing 30 miles west of Massawa, strikes due south for some 400 miles to a point somewhat east of the capital, Addis Ababa. As the Red Sea, from Massawa to the Bab el Mandeb, lies north-west and south-east, there is, enclosed between it

and the plateau, a great plain. This region—one of the hottest and most arid in the world—contains the Danakil country, French Somaliland, and the north-western end of British Somaliland. After passing Addis Ababa, the eastern edge of the plateau loses its identity as such and mingles with a range which trends south-west to a point not far north of Lake Rudolf. Parallel to its new direction, and on the far side of the Great Rift, are other ranges, which cut the north-eastern plain from a larger plain in the south. The latter, well watered, much of it swamp and jungle and very hot, lies south and east of a line drawn from the northern point of Lake Rudolf, through Harar to Berbera, and contains the greater part of British and the whole of Italian Somaliland, Ogaden, and Boran. In the west the plateau has no definite edge, but steps down to the Sudan in a succession of vast terraces.

The climate of both the plains is very trying to Europeans. While, however, the plain to the north-east is almost wholly unproductive, that to the south-east, especially Somalia, has been developed to a considerable degree. On the plateau the air is cool, the ground cultivable, and the land fairly suitable for European settlement. The rains there, which are concentrated in the summer months, are exceedingly heavy and bring practically all traffic, except that along metalled roads, to a standstill. This naturally has a limiting effect on the time available for military operations of any considerable scope.

Communications, at one time so difficult that it might take messengers from the capital six weeks to reach outlying provinces, were greatly improved by the Italians, and enabled them to extend and

consolidate their control over the country to a degree that was never possible to the Emperor. No doubt, all the work they have done in this respect will be of great value to Haile Selassie now that he has regained his throne.

Perhaps the outstanding strategic feature of Italian East Africa is its immense size, Abyssinia alone, 900 miles in length by 750 in width, being larger than France and Italy put together. Distances from the frontier to important objectives are usually very long, and large numbers of troops are, therefore, liable to be absorbed in the protection of lines of communications. In such a country, too, a small column is liable to be overwhelmed and a large column, tied to the base by a single road, might find supply an insoluble problem. Sir John Fortescue, the historian of the British Army, described Napier's campaign in Abyssinia in 1867 as 'perhaps the most difficult and dangerous enterprise in which a British Army was ever involved.' Napier landed at Zula, near Massawa, with 12,000 combatants and 30,000 followers, yet all he could muster for his decisive battle at Magdala, 400 miles away, was 3,500 men, the remainder being distributed as guards along the line of communications, although it lay almost entirely within the territories of friendly tribes.

In their campaign of 1935, however, the Italians, with powerful and well-equipped forces at their disposal, and greatly favoured both by fortune and by the mistakes of their adversaries, succeeded in overcoming all obstacles and in winning a quick and decisive victory.

A British Military Mission has been operating in the heart of the country ever since July, 1940. It

has done much valuable work both in propaganda and in arming and training natives, and its efforts were no doubt given a great fillip by Wavell's victories. It was, no doubt, kept busy correcting the faults so lavishly displayed by the Abyssinians in their war with Italy. In that campaign, the native forces, trained and untrained, attempted to fight in armies and not as guerrillas. As, however, strategy is governed by supply, an army that is to march and fight as an organized body must have a supply-system fitted to its needs. But supply in the Abyssinian army was of a most elementary nature. The food and ammunition of a rich man were carried by his slaves, those of a poor man by himself and/or his wife, with the result that an army of 80,000 men might have a following of 40,000 women, thus presenting a vulnerable target, especially to air-attack. When the supplies thus carried were so far exhausted that enough remained only for the homeward journey, the warrior had to return for more. Alternatively, as regards food, he might live on the country for a time; but, should he attempt to do so, the food-situation in the various districts and not strategic needs would dictate his movements. The Mission had to cure this fault and make the irregular operate, as far as possible, directly from his own home; for, from there, in whatever part of the country he might live, he could interrupt movements, make sudden raids, attack convoys and thus force the enemy either, for the sake of protection, to march in large bodies, or to remain in his towns and entrenchments behind wire. In the latter case he would use the weapon of starvation.

The Abyssinian has none of the fighting qualities of the warrior of the North-West Province of

India except his bravery. The Pathan never wastes a shot ; he will never give his enemy a target ; he will never charge home unless he sees an undoubted opening, for which he will wait for weeks, sometimes even for months, with untiring patience. The Abyssinian, on the other hand, boastful, careless, impatient, charges without adequate preparation, and without utilizing ground to obtain a covered approach. Then, if he fails, he disperses, much shaken, in flight. Camouflage he apparently despises, for he sports a conspicuous white dress, which, when he is in position may sometimes escape observation from the ground, but never from the air. Once these faults were eliminated, he proved, with his knowledge of a supremely intricate country and his natural bravery and dash, more than a match for the Italian.

The work of the Mission was, naturally, of particular importance to the reconquest of Abyssinia in view of the fact that the British Empire could not afford to lock up large armies in a secondary theatre to fight for a country whose future condition might be decided by the turn of events in the primary theatre. It could best accomplish its object of restoring Abyssinia to the former ruler by utilizing the inhabitants themselves for executing what is essentially their proper task. It is one of the more unfortunate effects of the progress of science that modern weapons and modern means of communication place such relatively overwhelming power in the hands of the successful aggressor that his victims can hardly hope, by their own strength, to throw off the yoke. The part of the Military Mission in equipping and training the rebel and in developing and directing his energies so that he dealt with his opponent on equal terms, was

therefore fundamental to the general scheme of our strategy.

Having thus surveyed the general conditions of warfare in Italian East Africa, we may turn to the doings of the various bodies of British troops in countries contiguous to its borders.

For months after the entry of Italy into the war, the garrisons of the Sudan and Kenya were vastly inferior in strength to the forces opposed to them, and they were compelled, therefore, to evacuate a number of posts on and near the frontier. Fortunately, however, in Kenya where the disproportion of force was higher than in the Sudan, great stretches of desert, through which an invader in his advance would have found the provision of supplies and water a formidable task, intervened between the frontier and the habitable and cultivable districts of the Colony and served as a valuable protection in those early days. Even such limited opportunities of invasion as there were, however, soon passed, for volunteers from all parts of the continent began to arrive : from South Africa, the Rhodesias, British East Africa, Nigeria, and even the far Gold Coast. It was an imposing and enlightening array. Not at first from its numbers, which had yet to grow before inequality could be redressed, but from the tribute it offered to the strength of the moral and cultural ties which bound together the peoples of the British Commonwealth, and which, from their unifying power, were proving at least equal as a means of waging war to the hectoring and dragooning sovereignties exercised by the dictatorial governments. While these Imperial forces are growing in strength we may turn to a study of the actions of the British forces in the Sudan.

The reason why Eritrea was selected as the target for the first and perhaps principal blow in East Africa were threefold. The first and least important was that Kassala, being on the railway from Port Sudan to Sennar, and connected, though distantly, by a good road with Khartum, would form a good supply-base. The second reason was that the blow would be directed against important objectives, Asmara and Massawa, in the oldest and firmest seat of Italian colonial power. Of these towns, Massawa with its well-equipped harbour would enable us to exchange a second-rate base and a difficult and extensive line of communication for a first-class supply-port and a connection with Asmara less than 40 miles in length. Asmara, high up on the plateau, yet closely linked with a sea-base, and, as the capital of the province, acting as a magnet for all roads from the south, was perhaps the best point from which to dominate Abyssinia until its reconquest was completed, and, later, to protect the interests of subject races until order and justice once more should reign in the land. The third reason was that whereas elsewhere in Abyssinia objectives were far distant, entailing advances of from 400 to 800 miles, only 170 miles as the crow flies separated Kassala from Asmara.

The first considerable success in this theatre was obtained on the 18th of January. By that date, Wavell had found it possible to spare troops from the Libyan front, for he had already captured Bardia and was hammering at the gates of Tobruk. Among them were one or more of those Indian divisions whose participation had been so effective at Sidi Barrani.

In all probability Wavell recognized early that a war in the desert was likely to be in the main a

speed war conducted with a spearhead of mechanized units and a shaft of troops at least partially motorized ; whereas a campaign in Abyssinia, though Badoglio had found use there for mechanized and motorized troops, and roads had been vastly improved since the days of his conquest, would be for the most part a slow war, a foot-soldier's war, a mountaineer's war. Hence Indian divisions trained to mountain-warfare and almost certainly motorized to a much lower degree than British and Australian divisions, would find a natural fighting sphere in the mountains of Eritrea and Abyssinia.

On the 18th of January, according to a report from the Special Correspondent of *The Times*, an Arab riding a white ass was seen approaching the British lines from the direction of Kassala. He asked to be allowed to present to the British commander a note, which proved to have been sent by the Mayor of Kassala and which read as follows : ' Please enter Kassala with your forces immediately. The Italians are retreating.' The British pressure by ground and air, which had increased steadily during the previous month, had thus borne fruit. Major-General W. Platt—the commander of our forces in the Sudan—who seems to have been on his toes in expectation of the evacuation, at once occupied the town and, at the same time, pushed columns on either flank in pursuit of the retiring Italians. His troops must have been straining at the leash ; for, though operating in broken and tangled foot-hills, they shot forward at a truly remarkable pace, and within three days of the start were 40 miles within the Eritrean border, the northern column on the road to Agordat, and the southern in Tessenei on the road to Barentu. Pursuing their



way along these roads, it was a case of fighting, fighting all the way, over ridges and down gorges in country that offered many advantages to the defender.

Wavell had managed—surprisingly enough, for his more immediate needs were of a devouring nature—to spare Platt a fair number of mechanized units. Some of them had probably come from India, where they had been accustomed to operate against the Wazirs and Mahsuds of Waziristan and were accordingly up to all the tactics and stratagems of mountain-warfare. On the other hand, any units that had been previously fighting in Libya must have felt the loss of that freedom to roam which they had enjoyed in the desert. All petrol-driven vehicles in Eritrea were, in fact, to a large extent tied to the roads and, consequently, there were repeated struggles between Italian sappers blowing craters and laying anti-tank mines in the roads in order to delay our tanks, and British and Indian sappers filling the holes and removing mines to enable the vehicles to push on.

There is no doubt but that, where an army depends largely on mechanical vehicles for its fighting-power in a country where defiles are both plentiful and unavoidable, mines furnish an obstacle very difficult to overcome. The assailant can remove them only when he has driven out of range the enemy groups covering them with fire—a process that will usually entail the bringing up of infantry and guns, a tough fight, and a considerable expenditure of precious time. Then, at the next defile, the enemy may not even bother to lay mines, but may employ dummies in their stead ; and it takes a brave man to charge a field of mines because he *thinks* they are dummies. If he has thought

wrongly, his chances of charging anything again will be small.

Even during an actual battle the tanks were often unable to leave the roads, and they therefore had to form a sort of central moving pivot for the advance, while infantry, mainly Indian and Sudanese, fought wide on either side of them in their endeavour to envelop enemy flanks.

On the 25th of January the northern column, having advanced about 100 miles, captured Biscia, which is the western terminus of the railway running through Agordat, Keren, Asmara to the sea at Massawa. Steadily pushing on, it occupied Agordat on the 1st of February and Barentu on the 2nd, taking several hundred prisoners, and bringing its total of captures to that point to 3,500.

At Agordat, the road from Kassala via Biscia joins that from Kassala via Barentu and thereafter only one approach was available for the march on Asmara. The greater part of Platt's army took this road, while the remainder continued its march from Barentu in the direction of Arresa, a point some 60 miles south-west of Asmara.

From Agordat to Keren, which formed the next objective, the road rises steeply from about 1,500 feet to 6,000 feet, the ascent being crowned by a natural fortress of peculiar strength. The invaders encountered no serious opposition until they arrived within five miles of Keren. Then they experienced a hardening resistance and, partly for that reason and partly from the appalling difficulties of the terrain, they were brought to a halt. Towering thousands of feet above them, they could see the white buildings of the town marking the centre of their objective, and they realized what a gruelling climb lay ahead. Tanks, mounting by hair-pin

bends, would be of little use until the summit of the plateau was reached. Up to that point guns and infantry would have to clear a way for them.

Beyond this great gateway of Keren, the obstacles to the advance would diminish considerably, for the road and railway rise thence by a gradual ascent to Asmara—a town unlikely to offer much resistance because, standing as it does near the edge of a cliff dropping precipitously 7,000 feet to sea-level, its defence could have no depth. In fact the key-problem of the whole undertaking lay in the capture of the gateway.

Platt's army came to a standstill on the 4th of February, by which date its captures numbered 6,500. On the 18th of February, Mussolini gave notice that he had appointed the Duke of Aosta, who had succeeded Graziani as Governor and Commander-in-Chief in East Africa, to be a General in his *Regia Aeronautica*. The Duke, in reply, said that the promotion had deepened his faith and increased his iron determination. 'We will last somehow at any cost,' he declared. 'Somehow' or other, he certainly succeeded in stopping what appeared to be the beginning of a complete Italian landslide before it could gather a perilous momentum. Collecting picked troops such as the Savoy Grenadiers from various parts of his command, he managed to assemble numerically superior forces on the plateau; and then, assisted, of course, immensely by the ground, held stoutly to the heights for more than five weeks.

Wavell's next stroke was an attempt to aid Platt by a flank attack from the north. First he despatched a Sudanese detachment southwards from Port Sudan. Then he added a body of French troops, mainly Senegalese, collected from all the

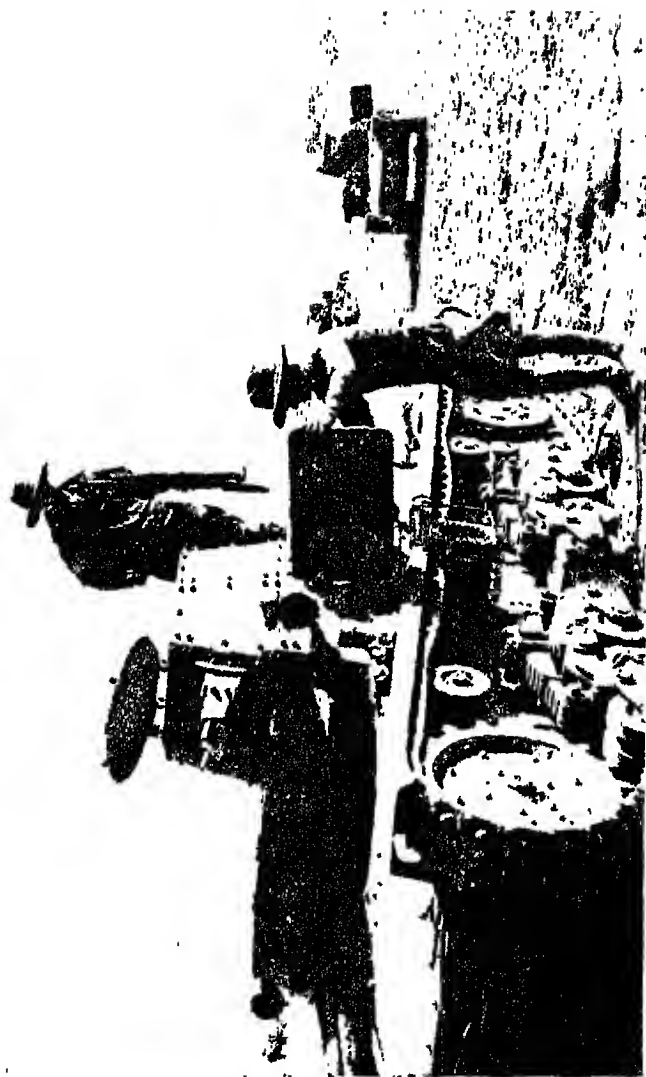
Free French colonies of Africa, many of whom had to be transported in lorries for thousands of miles. Making an appropriate use of sea-power, he embarked these seasoned warriors in British ships at Mombasa and sent them by sea to Mersa Taclai, a small port on the Red Sea recently captured from the Italians, lying 150 miles to the north-west of Massawa. Finally, a little farther south, he disembarked a detachment of the famous Foreign Legion, in whose ranks Germany, Italy, Poland, in fact almost all European nations, as well as America, were represented. Happy at the thought of action, all these parties set out on their march, intending to climb the plateau long before reaching Keren and thus strike on level terms against that fortress from the north where the approach offered fewer natural obstacles than from the west. Progress was excellent at first. The force made long marches daily, driving in Italian outposts on its way and, on the 24th of February, at Kub Kub, capturing 400 prisoners. When, on the 28th of February, it reached the neighbourhood of Keren, however, it found that, as the Italian outposts had given full warning of the advance, every preparation had been made for its reception. Stalemate soon ensued there, as on Platt's front, and on the front of the column which had moved from Barentu towards Arresa.

A factor that could not but exercise an overwhelming influence eventually over land operations throughout East Africa, was that Italian aircraft in that theatre had, towards the middle of March, almost ceased to fly. The persistent attacks made upon their fighting and bombing formations, their aerodromes, and their oil-reserves by the R.A.F., the South African Air Force, and the Rhodesian

squadrons, culminated towards the end of February in a terrific onslaught rendered specially effective by the previous capture of numerous, well-appointed aerodromes both in Eritrea and Somalia at short range from the main Italian bases. It seemed, in fact, as if our opponents in East Africa would shortly be in much the same position with regard to aircraft as the Abyssinians were in 1935.



CAPTURED BARDIA, SHOWING HARBOUR AND WADIS



AUSTRALIANS EXAMINE AN ITALIAN TANK

## CHAPTER X

### THE ETHIOPIAN PATRIOTS

THE WORK OF THE BRITISH MILITARY Mission in organizing revolt has already been touched upon. When the full story is revealed, it will present an amazing picture of isolated groups of British officers living among the various tribes, instigating them to action, rushing up camel-convoys of equipment for hundreds of miles through enemy country, assembling and organizing their recruits and training them for guerrilla warfare. And all this, not among a people bursting with patriotic fervour and with the resolve to throw off, at any sacrifice, the yoke of the oppressor, but among disunited tribes who had, except for the Amharas, never rejoiced in the rule of the Negus Nagasti at Addis Ababa, nor accepted it if in any way avoidable. The very word 'Abyssinia' (which they hate, by the way, much preferring Ethiopia) implies a mixture of races. Even the Emperor's sub-title of 'King of Kings' indicates that he was rather *primus inter pares*, a ruler over semi-independent feudal chieftains, than an arbitrary monarch. In consequence, when Marshal di Bono invaded the country in 1935, he found many local prototypes of Major Quisling ready to lend him aid. That the members of the British Mission have escaped betrayal in such conditions is attributable to the personality of each of its members and to the care exercised in their selection for an arduous and responsible duty.



The ex-Emperor Haile Selassie came early to Khartum and there interviewed many of his old supporters who journeyed secretly over great distances to pay him visits. He also interested himself in the organization and training of regular Abyssinian units which, under British and Australian officers and N.C.O.s, were to form the kernel of the Patriot forces. Shortly before our offensive into Eritrea opened, he himself, with the true instinct of a chieftain, crossed the frontier to become the leader of his tribesmen ; and it is quite possible that he took with him, as is the custom, a number of 'doubles' resembling him so closely as to be able to pose as the Emperor and thus make his personal appeal on many fronts.

The Mission received abundant and most gallant help from the air force. By a prearranged system of signals, pilots were able to find bodies of rebels, drop and pick up messages, bring up food, ammunition, instruments, as required and, when landing was feasible, to transport officers either to the centres of revolt or back to H.Q. in Kenya or the Sudan for the discussion of the situation and the weaving of new plans.

Many were their exciting experiences. On one occasion a pilot, having been told that a landing-ground had been cleared for him, found, on arrival, that not nearly sufficient runway had been allowed him. He was, therefore, forced to return home. There he managed to procure an ancient training machine of low power, capable, indeed, of landing in a restricted space, but terribly vulnerable to attack and doubtfully equal to climbing over the intervening mountains. After some hair-breadth escapes, he succeeded in landing his passenger.

The principal early successes of the Patriots occurred in the Gojjam country, south of Lake Tana. Gubba was the first post to fall to them and then, on February 18th, Dangila. This capture was of considerable importance, because the town lies on the road between the ancient and modern capitals—Gondar and Addis Ababa. Thereafter the particular body concerned moved south to attack Burye. This was a fortified centre of resistance with a garrison of 8,000 troops. For some weeks past it had been distantly surrounded by irregulars who, while eluding serious conflict, managed to a great extent to cut the communications of the town with the outside world. On the arrival of regular units, fresh from successes near Lake Tana, and of a small body of Sudanese troops, the town was subjected to siege, the bombardment feature being supplied by the R.A.F. in the course of numerous visits. On the 1st of March, a determined sortie was repulsed with heavy loss. On the following day the town was very heavily bombed in preparation for an attack which it was intended to deliver on the 3rd of March. On this day, however, the garrison evacuated its fortifications and, reduced to a strength of about 3,000 men, retreated along the road to the capital. Burdened with the transport of large numbers of wounded, pursued by the regulars, and harried ceaselessly by irregulars, its plight was an unhappy one.

Three other successes may be marked to the credit of the patriots at this period. On the 23rd of February, operating with British troops from the Sudan, one commando captured Noghali on the Blue Nile and, on the 25th of that month, another commando had the privilege of recapturing the former British frontier-post of Moyalé and of handing it over

proudly to South African troops. Then, on the 11th of March, the same body, pursuing along the road to Allata, captured the town of Javello, 70 miles north of Mega. In addition to these definite successes there was the immense nuisance-value of the all-pervading activities of the irregulars as partisans. The Patriot movement gradually gained great strength and proved of special value when the arrival of the rains turned the campaign mainly into a struggle with the forces of nature.

It is necessary at this point to utter a word of warning. We have no intention of occupying the country permanently but, in this our most recent conquest, we have incurred serious responsibilities. Ethiopia has never been a well-governed country. Slavery on a large scale has long been in existence. The Emperor promised to abolish it when Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations ; but he proved unable to implement his promise. The Italians did, indeed, decree abolition and succeeded to a great extent in enforcing it, but were unable to find solutions for many of the questions which it entailed. Then there was the problem of the Rases. These semi-independent chieftains possessed private armies and were a law unto themselves so long as they were beyond the reach of the imperial arm. Then, too, the profession of arms, usually exercised in internecine strife to the disturbance and economic destruction of the country, was, and still is, held in the highest honour. Another prolific source of trouble will be that of properties formerly belonging to followers of Haile Selassie and confiscated by the Italians. Again, cruelty to men and animals and diseases among men and animals were, and no doubt still are, prevalent to a high degree.

The Italians, who are, on the whole, good

colonizers, improved matters considerably. By the construction of some 4,000 miles of motor roads and of numerous aerodromes, and by the installation of signal communications, they were enabled to exercise both civil and military control to a degree never previously possible, and thus to handle most of the thorny problems indigenous to the country. They could not, however, go far towards their solution in the five years of their rule.

When this control is suddenly lifted at a moment when the country is alive with irregulars armed by us to a great extent with modern weapons, when Italian officials and farmers and their wives and families are at the mercy of any attack, when numerous old scores are awaiting settlement and, generally, when the sight of troubled waters suggests that fishing therein may be profitable, the vital need of having a fresh control ready to substitute instantly for the old becomes apparent. We have bound ourselves to assist the Emperor and guide him with our advice. Only in an ordered atmosphere can we fulfil that promise.

It is clear, from the little news that filters through from the wilds, that we have realized the danger inherent in re-conquest and have set up an administration in every province as we have occupied it.

This and the need of keeping a considerable body of troops, especially motorized troops, and aircraft to maintain order until the country shall have settled down, will be a serious tax upon some of the best of our man and machine power. It may be possible that the United States of America would be prepared, just as in Iceland, to take this burden off our hands.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE CONQUEST OF SOMALIA

**W**E MAY NOW TURN TO OPERATIONS in the south. Kenya marches with Italian East Africa for 1,000 miles, its frontier with Abyssinia being 500 miles in length and lying east and west, and that with Somalia of equal length lying north and south. The northern portion of the colony, respectively south and west of these frontiers, is a desert and waterless country, known as the Northern Frontier Province. It is traversed by no railways and by few good roads ; and the nearest railway—that from Mombasa by Nairobi to Lake Salisbury in Uganda—is seldom nearer than 400 miles to either frontier. This desert barrier provides an excellent and inexpensive form of defence for the British colony.

During the early days of the war, when Italy was possessed of a powerful army in East Africa, and Great Britain and her colonies had at their disposal in that region naught but the forces needed to police well-administered and contented countries, the Italians, advancing on many fronts, compelled us, as already stated, to evacuate a number of frontier posts. This called forth many gallant actions on the part of the British garrisons concerned, the full tale of which cannot be told in the available space. It may be well, however, to quote in illustration a single example—the defence of Moyalé.

This small outpost stood isolated beyond the wide desert that guarded the British colony on the north and was, therefore, difficult to support or relieve. Its garrison consisted of two officers and 150 men of the King's African Rifles under Captain J. D. Henderson of the Royal Scots Fusiliers. Its task, aside from police work, was to watch the exits from Abyssinian territory of the two motor-roads leading to Moyalé, the one from Dolo on the Juba River and the other through Mega from Negelli. Immediately opposite to it on the far side of the frontier was an Italian post, with whose garrison, in happier days, friendly relations had existed.

Towards the end of June, the Italian post was strongly reinforced, especially with guns, and the little British fort was then heavily bombarded in preparation for attack. When the defences had thus been thoroughly shattered, the Italians, some 1,200 strong, launched a number of assaults, all of which were repulsed, not indeed without difficulty, but with heavy loss to the assailants.

In the meantime a small relief force had been despatched from Nairobi to lend assistance to the hard-pressed garrison. It reached high ground in proximity to the fort, but it possessed neither the numbers nor the equipment needed for forcing its way through the Italian lines of circumvallation into Moyalé. It was therefore decided to withdraw the garrison. Accordingly, on the 14th of July, the Riflemen, working barefoot in complete silence, cut their way through row after row of Italian wire and, though the fact is hardly creditable to the besiegers, escaped unheard and unobserved to join the relief force. The junction effected, the combined force fell back to Buna.

In war, especially at the outset of a campaign, cases occur, such as that just quoted, where a decision has to be reached whether or not to abandon territory. Many pros and cons may be urged in each case, as to the desirability or otherwise of such action. In general, however, in the face of overwhelming odds, the less prepared of the two belligerents is well advised, basing himself on the adage *reculer pour mieux sauter*, to vacate invaded territory ; otherwise the defending army or detachment occupying it is liable to be surrounded or besieged, in which event it may be forced to a humiliating surrender with all the consequent implications of loss of men, arms and prestige ; or, alternatively, it may, owing to the pressure of public opinion, have to be reinforced or relieved, at a time when an operation of that nature might be contrary to sound strategic policy. On a small scale, in East Africa, the British High Command and/or the local commanders appear to have everywhere adopted a policy exactly tuned to the needs of the moment. The various isolated detachments offered a stout resistance to the invaders, causing them disproportionate loss, and then carried out an accurately-timed withdrawal. Having thus faithfully discharged their duties, they became available to play their part in future battles.

On the Abyssinian border there is a lack of suitable objectives. Moreover, classification of the few roads crossing it never reaches a higher grade than that of track except in the case of those from Moyalé to Mega and Allata and from Mega to Negelli. In any case, however, this frontier of Kenya with Abyssinia is unsuitable for offensive operations on a large scale because of the wide



FORWARD THE A.A. GUN

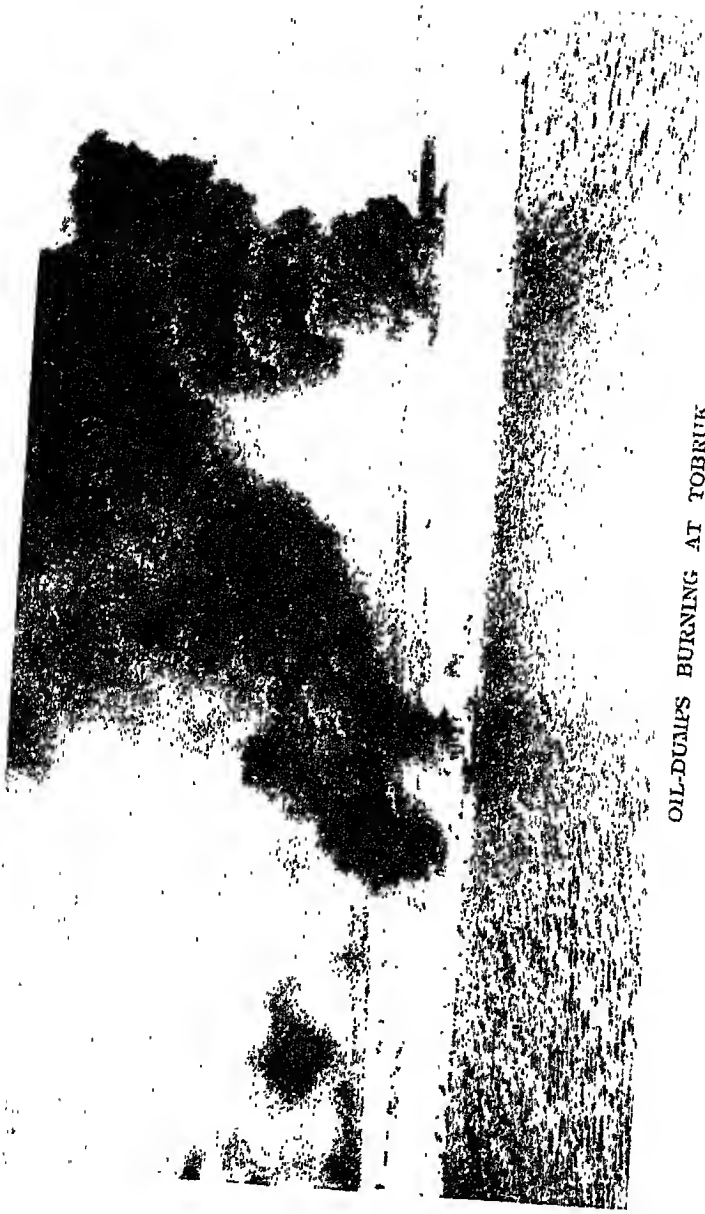




GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL AND HIS CORPS  
COMMANDER, SIR RICHARD O'CONNOR



AFTER BARDIA. CAPTURED MACHINE-GUNS



OIL-DUMPS BURNING AT TOBRUK

stretch of almost roadless desert to the south of it. Advances by small bodies would, however, serve useful purposes by causing the enemy to disperse his forces and by stirring the inhabitants to revolt.



From the Somaliland frontier there are many useful objectives. The Italian colony itself is one, for it has been well developed. It contains on and near the Juba many flourishing towns from the port of Kismayu, a few miles south-west of the mouth of the river, to Dolo near the frontier; and, beyond

Kismayu, along the coast, is Mogadishu, which is the capital of the province, with a population of 50,000 and a useful harbour. Moreover, Somalia is not only well roaded itself, but it connects with good roads to the north in Abyssinia. The main obstacles to its invasion are the stretch of roadless and waterless semi-desert to the west of the border, and the Juba itself, which is fifth in size of the rivers of Africa, everywhere wide, and in many parts flowing between marshy banks. In spite of these somewhat formidable hindrances, it was clear that, from Kenya, Somalia would furnish a more appropriate direct objective than would Abyssinia. Before settling down to any line of advance, however, we began, about the middle of January, to make numerous prods all along the frontier, especially (these maybe were feints) about Lakes Rudolf and Stephanie and to the east of those lakes from Dukhana, in which regions South African troops penetrated the frontier to a depth of 10 miles and captured several Italian posts.

The naming of the two lakes just mentioned has nothing whatever to do with the war, but its story has something of a human interest. Count Teleki was a Hungarian. He had been in love with the Crown Princess of Austria. The Crown Prince challenged him and he accepted ; but the duel was forbidden and Teleki exiled. The Hungarian Count then set out to draw good from evil and won fame as an explorer. In his travels he was marching through Abyssinia when, one day, after a particularly hot and tiring journey, he came to a beautiful lake of pure, sweet water, surrounded by cool and shady trees of refreshingly green foliage. He called the lake 'Stephanie,' after the

woman he loved, and spent a day or two of pure enjoyment by its shores. Then, resuming his trek, he came to another and much larger lake. It was drying up, the trees on its shores were sparse and withered, and the water too bitter to drink. The atmosphere was noisome, hot and steaming, and crocodiles abounded. He named it Rudolf after the Crown Prince, and passed hurriedly on. And Lake Rudolf it is to this day, with Stephanie a near neighbour.

Towards the end of January our patrols all along the line made deep penetrations into Somalia, reaching points 40 miles beyond the frontier. During the same period, our official *communiqués* announced that road-making on the part of our troops was in progress in Somaliland. That was the first news received that the Italian Colony had been invaded in strength.

The base from which the invaders operated has not yet been divulged. It was probably at Nairobi, where G.H.Q. had its quarters, from which point the valley of the Tana—right on the Equator—was no doubt followed in order to avoid the high mountains of Kikuyu.

The forces in Kenya were under Wavell's general control, and under the immediate command of Licut.-General Alan Gordon Cunningham. This officer is a distinguished gunner, but has by no means confined his soldiering to service in the Royal Regiment of Artillery. He has been chief instructor at the Machine Gun School. He passed the Naval Staff College and he attended the year's course at the Imperial Defence College. He should, therefore, have acquired a broad outlook and should possess considerable knowledge, not only of the various branches of the army, but also of naval

and air force matters, which should now stand him in good stead.

He is fifty-three years of age, and is the younger brother of the famous Sir Andrew, whose skilled and forceful conduct of naval operations in the Mediterranean—a sea which he has swept as with a broom—has been the joy of our friends and the terror of our enemies. As the younger brother won the D.S.O. and M.C. in France and as the father was a fellow of the Royal Society, it would seem that the 'Fighting Cunninghams' should possess that combination of brains with character which, as was pointed out in an earlier chapter in connection with General Wavell, is essential to the 'make up' of a great commander. "Hit them, hit them hard, and hit them again," was the slogan issued by the commander to his troops as they began their first great adventure; and right well was the order obeyed.

The frontier was crossed on the 24th of January at Liboi, 140 miles west of Gelib on the Juba, and a busy fortnight was then spent in road-making in the desert. In the meantime, active patrolling was in progress and the South African Air Force was busily bombing important points along the river.

On the 11th of February, Afmadu, 80 miles east of Liboi, was occupied without much difficulty by the King's African Rifles, having been heavily bombed by the R.A.F. on the preceding night. Four days later, South African troops made the first important capture of the campaign in Kismayu, a town of 5,000 inhabitants, possessing the best natural harbour in Somalia. About the same time the South African column operating from the neighbourhood of Lake Rudolf penetrated 50 miles beyond the Abyssinian border into the Hobok

area, capturing several more Italian posts. These particular successes, coupled with the remarkable achievements of the South African Air Force, signalized still further the solidarity, already displayed in Libya, of the Empire's effort, and must have been peculiarly disturbing to the Axis propagandists who had so freely predicted that South Africa would remain neutral, if she did not become actively hostile.

The operations on the Juba were of a complicated nature. The river, so far as it lies in Somalia, runs for 300 miles from north to south, parallel to the frontier. Towards the mouth it is 250 yards wide and the most likely points of passage had been fortified. It might have seemed, therefore, to form an impregnable obstruction to the further progress of the invaders. But, in fact, natural obstacles, whether they be rivers, mountains or deserts, have but rarely barred the way to a resolute leader. History has been made on the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula, the Indus, far more by famous passages than by successful defence.

History repeated itself in 1940 in the quick sweep of mechanized divisions over the rivers of France. It was to repeat itself once more in Somalia. The Italians, dispersed widely in relation to their numbers, could not be strong everywhere. A series of clever feints bewildered them, distracted their attention, and caused them to disseminate their strength still further.

The first British success was won by the Gold Coast Regiment which seized the bridge-head at Bulderillo. Four days after this capture, South African troops crossed the river by night and, while one group, assisted by covering fire from armoured cars, attacked Gelib, another group



isolated the garrison of this town by striking across the road between it and Brava. The result was a success which eventually brought in 3,000 prisoners. Passages were then effected at other places—Jumbo below and Bardera above. The vital point in this area was Jumbo, on the left bank of the estuary ; for it obstructed the coastal road and, until its capture, prevented the advance of our mechanized forces towards Mogadishu. By the end of February the whole line of the Juba River was in our hands, and the troops, where not busy marching or fighting, were bathing in its waters to refresh their bodies after the hot and dusty approach-march over the desert.

It will be remembered that, after the battle of Sidi Barrani, Wavell despatched his light tanks ahead to pin down the garrison of Bardia to its fortifications and that, as soon as reliefs arrived, these tanks were not allowed to await the fall of the fortress (and enjoy the Chianti they might expect therewith) but were sent westwards, first to capture aerodromes and then to close the exits of Tobruk. Again, when relieved at Tobruk by the besieging force proper, off they had to go on other adventures. This procedure was an essential and most effective part of the strategy employed in Libya by Wavell, who was, as should be borne in mind, in chief command of both the Army of the Nile and the Army of Kenya. It was repeated by Cunningham. Long before that active commander had fully conquered the line of the Juba, his armoured fighting-vehicles were on the road to Mogadishu. On the 24th of February, Brava—a considerable seaport, no less than 150 miles along the coast from Kismayu—was captured by West African troops and then, the very next day, in

breathless exploitation of success, the capital, Mogadishu, 75 miles farther on, was occupied.

The rapidity of this movement compared favourably even with that of its swift forerunner in Libya. The assembly point of the army has not yet been stated, nor is it known when road-making finished and the march proper began. It seems reasonable, however, judging from the map, to suppose that the main body of the army traversed at least 400 miles of thorn-desert before reaching the frontier, and that it passed through Liboi about the 7th of February. Its marches through hostile territory via Afmadu, Gelib, Kismayu, Brava, and Mogadishu (*reached on the 25th of February*) amount in length to a total of 485 miles. They were covered in eighteen days; and, as they followed immediately upon a march of 400 miles, of a duration yet to be revealed, but without question speedy, they form one of the most striking records of all time, and they rob the German conclusively of his monopoly of the *Blitzkrieg*.

Such an achievement is possible, as in Libya, only where resolute leadership is backed by fine staff work and by performance of the highest order in maintenance and supply. The administrative services are, therefore, deserving of the highest praise. And it is well that this point should be stressed; for otherwise the limelight tends to rest entirely on the victorious troops, while those who render victory possible remain shrouded in darkness.

Besides its remarkable speed, Cunningham's campaign had another notable similarity with that in Libya. In the latter theatre, while the R.A.F. kept the Italian machines out of the sky and acted both as long-range and short-range artillery, the

British navy continually supported the right flank of the advancing army. In Somalia the procedure was precisely the same, except that, for the most part, the South African Air Force took the place of the R.A.F.

The South African Air Force and the navy seem to have operated very happily together. The airmen spotted targets along the coast, signalled their positions to the sailors, and then 'spotted' for the ships' guns. Consequently, on two occasions, Italians resting peacefully in their camps were surprised by the arrival of salvos of naval shells, to escape from which they plunged incontinently into the jungle after suffering heavy casualties. These joint efforts went far to account for the ease with which the army occupied Brava and Mogadishu.

In Mogadishu, the enemy, astounded by the pace of our advance, offered no opposition; and, with the fall of the capital, resistance in Somalia came practically to a close. The occupation of the colony was, however, not an end in itself, but only a means to an end—namely, the complete defeat of the Italians in East Africa. How was Cunningham to use it as a stepping-stone to higher things? Should he march by the coast to British Somaliland and, by its recapture, remove the stigma attached to its loss? Such a move would have two apparent advantages. In the first place, it would be perfectly safe, for no opposition was likely to be encountered; in the second place, it would have the continued assistance of the navy, both in gun-support, if need be, and in the conveying and landing of supplies.

On the other hand, British Somaliland was but a poor objective. The prestige lost there had been regained manifold by the recent successes in Libya and Somalia. Moreover, the reoccupation of its



BRITISH TROOPS CROSSING AN ITALIAN BRIDGE



FACING TOBRUK. ANTI-TANK GUN IN ACTION

waste areas would not seriously better the situation beyond its own boundaries, whereas a victory achieved in the heart of Abyssinia might decide the campaign and would automatically free the colony from Italian domination. Cunningham was, therefore, certain to look elsewhere for a fresh target for his quick-hitting weapon.

Fortunately for him, a first-class highway runs northwards through the Ogaden country from Mogadishu by Dagga Bur and Jigjiga to Harar, a town second only to the capital in size and political importance. This was the route traversed by Graziani when in command of the Southern Italian Army in 1935. It had then been developed into a tarmac road only as far as the borders of Somalia and ran thence for 250 miles through swamp and jungle before it began the steep ascent of the Ahmar mountains. The Italian commander managed, indeed, to win his way along it, but it tried his engineers, skilful though they were, to the limit. He spent twenty-six days in covering the 200 miles between Gorahai and Jigjiga and took credit for that performance as being the finest march in history. Favoured by a better road, more mechanical vehicles, and a more thrusting spirit, British troops covered similar distances in the same area in as many hours.

At this stage we may estimate the results and the rewards of the successful campaign in Somalia. Taking strategic results first: by far the most important gain was the acquisition, in lieu of the almost impassable deserts of northern Kenya, of a first-class, well-roaded, and in some respects, well-supplied base lying at right angles to the direction in which the main theatre could be effectively invaded by the Mogadishu-Harar road, and based

upon British sea-power. Moreover, another excellent road, known as the Royal Road, runs from the capital by Isha Baidoa and Dolo to Negelli and thence to Addis Ababa, enabling connection to be made by the East African troops marching along it with the South African forces advancing from Moyalé and Mega and, in its continuation northwards, offering another threat to the capital. Then, the occupation of the three seaports, Kismayu, Brava, and Mogadishu, in which about 35,000 tons of enemy shipping were captured or sunk, deprived the enemy of bases which, especially the last-named, could have been used as starting-points for raiding adventures against the Cape route and our traffic in the Indian Ocean.

The material results were also considerable. The enemy had been shorn of a province of the acreage of France, developed by him from a desert to a self-supporting colony, exporting annually 20,000 tons of the homely banana and containing 1,000,000 cattle, 2,000,000 sheep and goats, 60,000 camels, and motor-roads covering over 8,000 miles. Incidentally, according to the Special Correspondent of *The Times* in Cairo, 7,000 tons of sugar were among the rewards of battle—a welcome addition of a scarce commodity to stocks in the Middle East. In the absence of any good natural harbours along the coast, the open roadstead at Mogadishu had been improved, by lavish expenditure on breakwaters, into a useful seaport.

Thus, taken on the whole, Somalia was no mean prize. Not that the British Empire has any wish to retain the colony, but its occupation by the Imperial army definitely impairs Italy's usefulness as an ally and her power of continuing the war.

Of prisoners, no less than 21,000 were taken out

of a garrison believed to have numbered 33,000, against losses even lower, both actually and proportionally, than those suffered by our troops in Libya. Of booty, besides the abundant yield of the battlefields, a well-stocked arsenal, which the enemy had not found time to empty, was discovered in Mogadishu. It contained, *inter alia*, hundreds of machine-guns and thousands of rifles, which no doubt proved most useful for arming Ethiopian Patriots.

Cunningham now took the highway to Harar. In his first bound he got as far as Gabre Darrè, 130 miles beyond the frontier of Somalia, without encountering any opposition except from a few aerial patrols. With his second bound he reached Dagga Bur, another 120 miles farther forward and about 120 miles as the crow flies from Harar. By the time he had gained this point, the tale of the enemy killed and captured had increased to 31,000—a figure which indicates that 93 per cent of the garrison of Somalia had ceased to exist. There is, indeed, an amazing swiftness and finality about the modern battle, whether fought in Europe or in the Middle East. Time is the fourth dimension in war. Its vital value has been recognized in all ages by the great captains, but never before have its tiniest periods assumed such importance. The successful commanders in this world-conflict, are those who have fully recognized the implications of warfare in four dimensions conducted with modern speed-weapons.

At this point, on the 14th of March, before leaving the campaign in East Africa, we may examine the state of affairs along the whole front. So far as could be gathered from official *communiqués*—usually both laconic and obscure—and from other information as to whose reliability there was often



no guide, there appear to have been eleven, perhaps twelve separate forces, apart from irregulars, operating at this time in Abyssinia. In the extreme north there was General Platt's army west of Keren, the Free French troops north of Keren, and a detachment that moved from Barentu towards Arresa—all three groups being at a standstill. Then there was a group about which but little has been said of late. It appears to have started from Gedaref, turned a strong body of Italians out of Umm Hagar on the River Setit, forced it to abandon its guns and transport and take to the hills and then pursued it towards Gondar. Possibly this group, after having finished its particular task, joined the Barentu detachment. The fifth column was that which, starting from Gellabat, pressed back the Italians from Metemne along the road to Gondar.

Next came the Patriots who had captured Burye and were surrounding Debra Markos, the last important post on the road from Gondar to Addis Ababa. Continuing south, the Sudanese and East African troops who recaptured Kurmuk occupied Arrosa with the assistance of a detachment of Belgian soldiers from the Congo. Immediately south of this area there was an unexpected blank ; for not until later did a column move from Gambela (a post on the Sobat river which used to be connected by launch with the White Nile and Khartum) via Gore along the good and, as distances go in Abyssinia, short road to Addis Ababa. Turning south-east, we come, after a very long gap, to the Patriots who captured Moyalé and have occupied Javello, then to the South Africans who were moving from Mega to Negelli with a detachment on the road to Allata. Penultimately (if there is

such a word), we have the East Africans marching from Dolo to Negelli and, finally, the spearhead of Cunningham's army at Dagga Bur. Was there ever a more complicated campaign either to direct or, as an observer, to follow and understand?

It is of interest to note that, whereas Wavell had the advantage of interior lines throughout the Middle Eastern arena and had, in spite of the immense area he had to cover and a general poverty of communications, made good use of it, the Italians had been on interior lines in East Africa and had drawn no profit therefrom except in the collection of troops to stop Platt at Keren. It might have been expected, now that Abyssinia is comparatively well roaded, that they would have effected concentrations in order to overwhelm one or more of the invading columns; but they do not appear to have even attempted to do so. Possibly, the action of the Ethiopian irregulars in cutting communications, interrupting supplies, blocking defiles, and so forth, rendered combination between the various Italian groups difficult and hazardous. It is more likely, however, that failure in this respect was due mainly either to a lack of initiative or to a distrust of their troops on the part of commanders; for, with the exception of the initial seizure of border-posts and of the attempted sortie from Burye, there appears to be no record of an offensive stroke of any kind by the Italians in the course of the campaign.

It was thought, indeed, that at one time an invasion of Kenya from Somalia was brewing; for the South African Air Force discovered a concentration of lorries at Mogadishu so vast that it could hardly have been intended for any other purpose. The airmen promptly bombed it, and bombed it

again, smashing or setting on fire a great number of vehicles and destroying some of the oil-supplies on which they depended' Thus, what may have been the one Italian venture at an offensive on a large scale in the East African theatre was nipped in the bud.

## CHAPTER XII

### BACK TO THE BALKANS

#### (1) *Greece and Rumania*

WHEN WE CROSSED TO THE SOUTHERN shores of the Mediterranean in order to follow Wavell's counterstroke, the situation, as we left it in the Balkan theatre, was that Hitler had begun pouring troops into Rumania, mainly in order to protect his principal source of oil, but under the pretence of training the Rumanian Army, and that Greece, having repelled the Italian invasion and herself taken the offensive, had won a series of striking successes, particularly at Koritza, Argyrocastro and Klisura.

The Greeks, assisted by the R.A.F. and the navy, and furnished to a considerable extent with British supplies, continued to retain the initiative. They made no spectacular advances ; but, with astonishing and unceasing aggressiveness, they gained fresh ground and prisoners every day in some portion of their line. By the end of December, they were within twenty miles of Berat. On the other hand, Tepelini, the last guard to Valona, was, despite terrific attacks upon it, still untaken.

Metaxas, the Prime Minister, made a heartening New Year's speech. " We begin 1941," he declared, " resolved to fight to the last breath until the enemy shall have been exterminated. We shall suffer, but . . . we will endure." His death, which took place a month later at the age of seventy, was a

calamity of the first order to Greece and to the cause to which she had consecrated her people. He was succeeded by Koritzis, the Governor of the National Bank. The new Premier, in his first public utterance as such, showed that he was determined to follow the course initiated and pursued by his predecessor. "Our first aim," he said, "is to gain the victory." Papagos continued to command the army.

The Italians made repeated attempts to regain the initiative. Caballero, who had replaced Soddu, because the latter had shown a lack of Fascist pugnacity, organized a succession of fierce counter-attacks. In one of them, the 'Wolves of Tuscany'—a well-advertised division—lost 1,000 prisoners, and the last of the series, delivered by some 15,000 Blackshirts, was repelled at a cost of 1,000 in killed alone. By this time, the number of Italian prisoners in Greek hands amounted to 22,500, and total Italian losses in the Albanian campaign were estimated semi-officially at 120,000. After the failure of the Blackshirt attack, the Greeks resumed the offensive and succeeded in making an advance—the most considerable for some weeks—of three miles in the coastal sector.

During all this period, the Greek leaders must have been torn with anxiety with regard to the German threat to their own rear. They almost certainly had to despatch some of their hard-pressed troops to Salonika as soon as news reached them, as it did on the 23rd of February, that German armies were beginning to cross the Danube into Bulgaria. It is, therefore, a remarkable tribute to their courage and soldierly spirit that, at such a crisis, they should, as soon as they had repulsed the Blackshirts, have again and at once returned to the attack.

About this time, Mussolini himself decided to take a hand in Albania in order, by his presence, to inspire his soldiers to a special effort to hurl back the Greeks. His reasons for aiming at a decisive success at this particular moment can only be guessed. Hitler may have told him to exercise every possible pressure with one or all of three objects : the first, in order to prevent the Greeks from detaching troops to Salonika ; the second, so as to enable the Italians, should the attack prove successful, to constitute the right arm of a pincer movement, of which the left arm would be formed by the German army marching on Salonika ; and the third, in order to impress Yugoslavia and push that doubting nation down on the Axis side of the fence. On the other hand, the plan may have originated with Mussolini, for the *Duce* may have hoped, by a victory snatched at the last moment, before the active intervention of his ally, to escape from a humiliating servitude and restore national and personal prestige.

Whatever the reason, or reasons—for, no doubt, several were operative—preparations were made for mounting an attack of far greater power than any previously attempted.

As usual, in Axis circles, the coming stroke was loudly heralded. The radio and the Press, just as was the case in Germany in August 1940, before the battle over Britain, foretold early and decisive victories ; and, in order to do them full justice, war correspondents were sent to the scene of action by the dozen.

The special force which the *Duce* assembled must have numbered between 100,000 and 120,000 men. The attack was launched, on a front of about eighteen miles, from the central sector, its right being

about Tepelini, around which, as usual, a most furious struggle raged. The battle lasted almost without intermission for seven days—from the 9th to 16th March. At one time, the onslaught would be general along the whole line; at another, it would be densely concentrated on a front as short as two and a half miles. But, whatever the form it took, it was repulsed. The Italian losses are difficult to gauge, but they must have totalled at least 15,000 in killed and wounded. One estimate of some authority puts them as high as 48,000. The prisoners captured numbered 3,000.

According to the Balkans correspondent of *The Times*, the Greeks appear to have owed their success in some measure to anticipating their opponent by carrying out, just prior to the Italian assault, a succession of what were, in essence, reconnaissances-in-force intended to clear up the situation. During these operations, they discovered that the Italians were intending to use a string of heights intervening between the combatants as jumping-off places for the attack. These points the Greeks seized and, in so doing, threw the Italians' plans to a great extent out of gear.

The magnitude of the undertaking, the wide advertisement it received and the presence of Mussolini and some of his Ministers, had combined to raise the greatest hopes in Italy and even in Germany. Yet, in spite of a reckless expenditure of life, not a foot of ground had been gained. The Germans were furious, the Italians crestfallen. Even Gayda and Ansaldo were sombrely silent.

The Greeks, on the other hand, were naturally jubilant. They rightly regarded the success as among the more important they had won, to be classed with Koritza and Klisura. General Papagos,

in his order of the day to the army, was able to say : 'The seven-day effort made by the enemy has failed to shake you, and has afforded you a fresh occasion for the display of your splendid warlike qualities and, above all, of your faith in the justice of your cause.'

According to Reuter, the comment of the Athens radio on the situation as viewed from the Greek side after the battle was to the effect that— 'The Italians seem to be occupied with gathering together the remnants of their scattered legions—a task as disheartening as the efforts of all the king's horses and all the king's men to put Humpty Dumpty together again.'

As usual, the R.A.F. afforded our gallant allies unstinted support and, together with the Greek air force, maintained superiority in the air over the battlefield throughout the struggle. One incident must have rejoiced the hearts of such Greek soldiers as were fortunate enough to witness it. A formation of British fighters sighted an Italian group of bombers, escorted by fighters, and immediately attacked. Although outnumbered by the fighters alone, the British airmen shot down no less than fourteen of the enemy machines without any loss to themselves.

RUMANIA. The fate of Rumania, like that of all the small nations who tried to steer a safe middle course, was an unhappy one. On the 30th of August, by the arbitration award at Vienna, she was mulcted of large territories and reduced to her compass of 1914. Her diminished boundaries were given a guarantee, for what it was worth, by Germany and Italy ; and Ribbentrop, mendacious as ever, then declared that the last remaining question in south-eastern Europe was settled.



On the 4th of September, the Prime Minister resigned in protest against the award. On the same day, the King appointed in his place General Antonescu, a former Defence Minister and Chief of the Staff, who was the leader of the Iron Guard and strongly pro-Nazi, and endowed him with plenary powers. At once, all the outworks of democracy crashed to the ground. On the 5th, the constitution was abolished and Parliament dissolved. On the 6th, King Carol was forced to abdicate in favour of his young son Michael, who was clearly intended to be a puppet ruler. On the same day, Iron Guards distributed manifestos expressing profound trust in the Axis Powers and loudly proclaiming their faith in the justice of the New Order. As an example of that justice, they proceeded to arrest many of their principal opponents and to throw them into jail, at the same time initiating a brutal anti-Jew campaign and setting up an ordinance making the Iron Guard the only political party—the sole judge, that is, of its own actions. The familiar lines, in fact, of Nazi procedure.

In the middle of the month, German railway and oil experts together with the usual swarm of Gestapo agents commenced to arrive, and German aircraft landed in the oil-fields. Simultaneously, British residents were arrested on the flimsy ground of intended sabotage, and a subject press began to pour forth streams of abuse against Britain. Antonescu, continuing the programme, invited Germany to reorganize the Rumanian army. At once, numerous officers, ready dressed for the part, appeared in Bucharest, and German forces, passing through Hungary, occupied the chief strategic points in Rumania.

Hard upon their arrival, the usual exploitation

ensued. Food, for instance, was requisitioned and exported to Germany, with the result that prices for the inhabitants rose from 100 to 400 per cent, and starvation became widespread. As another example, all available tanker-barges on the Danube were sequestrated for the transport of oil.

The next step, on the 14th of November, intended to render Rumania helpless in German hands, was a decree by Antonescu ordering the demobilization of the army. That was followed by the adhesion of Rumania to the Three-Power Pact and, after that again, came a ten-year agreement with Germany by which, in return for technical and financial aid in all forms of economic activity, the Balkan state was to place the whole of her products at German disposal.

As German control grew firmer, the Iron Guards took sterner measures. Invoking again the sacred name of justice, they murdered several former Ministers and shot a number of generals and other officers of the army and police in prison. Then came internal quarrels in the Iron Guard, resulting in the loss of hundreds of lives in street fighting and in more murders. M. Tilea, the Rumanian Minister in London, who, with most of the staff of the Legation, had resigned as a protest against the actions of his Government, appealed to the civilized world not to judge the Rumanian nation 'by the shameful horrors from which every human being must shrink.'

This short history of Rumania from the time when she fell under German influence furnishes an interesting example of the German method of conquest organized simultaneously from within and without by a combination of intrigue, corruption, and intimidation. Without the loss of a single

soldier, Germany had won an apparently permanent footing in the country which contained her principal source of oil-supply and which furnished a base for further operations of a nature likely to set all enemies and neutrals guessing hard as to where the next blow would fall.

It might have been expected that the horrid fate of this unfortunate country would have proved a warning to such of its neighbours as were not already under German domination, and would have caused them, especially with the inspiring example of Greece before their eyes, to unite against the common enemy of mankind. Unfortunately, however, just as with the small nations of western Europe, each Balkan state was terrified by the magnitude and proximity of German power and hoped that, by the exercise of strict neutrality and the renewal of non-aggression treaties, it would somehow escape from the all-pervading menace. Forward and back, trembling potentates and Ministers travelled to visit the ogre at Berchtesgaden, there to be threatened or cajoled as might best suit Hitler's needs of the moment.

On the 10th of February, the British Ambassador asked for his passports on the grounds that Rumania was being used, without protest from the Government, as a military base for Germany in furtherance of her plans for prosecuting the war. A few days later, the British Empire was at war with Rumania and had declared a blockade against her. By that time, it was estimated that twenty-five German divisions were in the country, of which seven were motorized and three were armoured divisions.

It may be of interest at this point to seek the origin of German actions, which proved so remarkably effective in Rumania, which, as is shortly to

be shown, were again to be successful in Bulgaria and which had led successively to the downfall of Denmark, Norway, Holland, and Belgium.

The basic theory, it may be surmised, is that, in modern warfare, it is almost impossible to conceal the vast preliminaries to a major attack from the prying eyes and cameras of airmen, especially when the two armies immediately concerned are in close contact, and that, therefore, the probability of effecting surprise, on which, more than any other weapon in the armoury of attack, reliance has hitherto been placed, must be regarded as negligible. In view, however, of the immense technical strength of the modern defence, the prospects of success in attack would be insignificant unless a substitute for surprise of comparable value could be discovered. The great German General Staff have apparently been delving into this matter and have managed to find one. They are notoriously thorough in all their ways and in none more so than in their search for the military lessons of ancient warfare. The Schlieffen plan for the invasion of France in 1914 was, for instance, based on a monumental study of the battle of Cannæ. For the war of 1940-41 (or perhaps we should say, 1938-41; for operations against Austria and Czechoslovakia might well be included) Keitel or some other star-performer, perhaps Hitler himself, hunted even further back and made a study of the invasion of Canaan. There he found in Rahab, the harlot, a humble and inoffensive prototype of Major Quisling; but, more particularly, as regards the present argument, did he discover the value and the technique of intimidation.

Joshua was an expert in that art. He exploited to the utmost the magic and the deeds of the

Israelites. Here, he declared, are a chosen people for whose passages the waters of the Red Sea dried up and the river Jordan divided so that they might march unhindered and dry-shod to the Land of Promise ; a people, too, that had defeated the Amorites and destroyed them root and branch. From the hill-tops of Ammon, he proclaimed the power of his arm and the miracles that accompanied it, so that, in Jericho, ' hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man.' Then, with all pomp and circumstance, he encompassed the city with a procession : the armed men in the van, behind them the seven priests, blowing seven trumpets and, next in train, the Ark—the miracle-worker. So, once a day for six days, while cold fear held the watchers in Jericho. Then, on the seventh day, seven times was the city encompassed and, as a climax, while the trumpets of ram's-horn gave forth a final blare, the people, long silent, shouted with one voice. At once, the walls fall, the defenceless city is assailed, and the inhabitants are put to the sword.

So runs the parable, now fundamental to plans of Axis aggression. The methods may vary in each case : with Joshua—the miracles, the display of the miracle-worker, the reiteration of the magic number, the proclamation of previous victories, the crescendo of pressure, the climax ; with the Germans the menace of titanic, ready and swift-moving power, the magic of the wizard who won through from the beer-tavern of Munich to the control of a continent, the ceaseless reiteration of lies, the gradually-growing pressure which, if it leads to surrender, is followed by ruthless enslavement and, if it fails in its purpose of bloodless conquest, is followed by a sudden assault in over-



HEAVY FIELD-GUN IN ACTION



POUNDING TOBRUK

whelming force. Only their principle of weakening by disintegration from within did the General Staff borrow from the New Testament—namely that—  
‘Every house divided against itself shall not stand.’



## CHAPTER XIII

### BACK TO THE BALKANS

#### (2) *Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey*

BULGARIA. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO have a considerable sympathy for Bulgaria, even though she has now joined the ranks of our enemies. She so obviously wished to remain out of the war and so many of her people, including the whole of the peasantry, were strongly opposed to the German connection. Even those with Nazi sympathies were a little afraid of entering the ring lest they should back the wrong horse in the greatest of stakes for the second time in succession. All through last autumn and winter, King Boris and his Ministers constantly expressed a determination to safeguard Bulgaria's independence. They even dismissed the Chief of Police for displaying pro-Nazi activities. That appears, however, to have been their only defensive action. They were too much afraid of Hitler to ban German 'tourists,' whose numbers by the middle of October reached 10,000, or to demand the removal of German wireless stations which had been erected at the Shipka Pass and other points on the Stara Planina. Then, on the 16th of October, they weakly signed a financial agreement restricting Bulgarian trade to Germany and German-occupied territory, thus placing the country in economic bondage to Teutonic greed. One effect of the agreement was to enable the Germans to remove

so much food from the country that the unfortunate peasantry who produced the food had to be rationed in staple articles of their diet.

In the middle of November, the King went on a visit to Germany, presumably by pressing invitation which he may have thought it unwise to refuse. There he had an interview with Hitler, who appears to have pointed out what an opportune moment it was for the realization of Bulgaria's righteous claims. If only she would sign adhesion to the Three-Power Pact, he probably suggested, there was so much to which she might help herself: from Turkey, Adrianople; from Greece, the whole water-front on the Aegean from Salonika eastwards; from Yugoslavia, Tsaribod and a slice of Western Macedonia. It reads very like the Temptation on the Mount. 'All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship the New Order.' King Boris, who was strongly pro-British at heart, had not quite the courage to say: 'Get thee hence, Satan,' especially as he had recently accepted the gift of the Southern Dobrudja; but he did point out to the Führer that small states could not risk becoming involved in the wars of giants, and he managed to escape from the interview uncommitted. He may even, on his return, have hinted to the British Minister that a little pressure on the British side would be helpful in smoothing his path; for, on the 26th of November, Mr. Butler, in reply to a Parliamentary question, announced that the Foreign Secretary 'welcomes this opportunity of stating that, provided that Bulgaria does not join or assist, either actively or passively, the enemies of Great Britain, or attack her Allies, it is the intention of His Majesty's Government to do their best to ensure

that, in any eventual peace settlement to which Great Britain is a party, the integrity and independence of Bulgaria shall be fully respected.'

This announcement, plus some tepid support from Russia, and the news of the rousing Greek victory at Koritza, had a heartening effect for a time. It stirred King Boris to utter a public warning against too hurried conclusions as to the outcome of the war, and the Parliamentary Committee of Foreign Affairs to reject unanimously a proposal made about the same time by Asankoff—the Bulgar Fascist leader—that Bulgaria should sign the Three-Power Pact.

Germany herself had to feel her way rather cautiously. She was not sure what the reactions of the Soviet Union would be, were she to occupy Bulgaria, or at what point Turkey would take action were she to use Bulgaria as a bridge by which to attack Greece. Moreover, anything in the shape of general warfare in the Balkans—a theatre always prone to the rapid spread of any conflagration—would interfere greatly with the transport of the vital supplies she was drawing from the various Balkan States.

For some time, therefore, she moved very slowly, making use of the influence she had always possessed over the officers of the Bulgarian Army, backing every kind of dissident organization and sending experts in various branches to spy out the land and make it ready for subsequent invasion.

With the New Year, however, she began to increase her pressure. M. Filoff, the Prime Minister, went to Vienna for a week. He was summoned there, no doubt; but, back in Sofia, he insisted that his visit had been paid in order to see a doctor and that it had no political significance.

In whatever interviews he may have been accorded, he appears to have kept his end up ; for his return was the signal for a violent Nazi Press campaign demanding that he should resign. Far from obeying that behest, he made a speech emphasizing the need of safeguarding the independence of the country, of staying out of war if possible, and of obtaining revision of frontiers only by peaceful means. What a pity he could not have maintained that attitude !

But the difficulties were great. A German army of forty divisions was near the borders of Bulgaria ; thousands of German aircraft might bomb her cities ; Britain had no satisfactory access to her, by which she could render aid ; Turkey might assist her, indeed, but she was obviously stronger within her own boundaries than without ; Rumania had fallen ; Greece was engaged to the hilt ; Yugoslavia was hesitant ; and Russia was blowing both hot and cold. Nevertheless, up to the end of January, the Prime Minister was still declaring that, in order to safeguard her frontiers, Bulgaria must become an ' invincible fortress.'

At the beginning of February, however, Filoff must have weakened ; for Germany, from that point onwards, played a more confident hand. She poured in more and more tourists, despatched ground-staffs, oil, and aircraft accessories to the various aerodromes and, by the middle of the month, in spite of official denials, was beginning to land her air-borne troops in the country. At the same time, German divisions were arriving at all the main crossing-places on the Danube and were building pontoon-bridges over the river. The Bulgarian resistance had clearly come to an end, for the officially-inspired Press was now busily

pointing out that it would be both useless and disastrous to attempt to oppose a German passage through the country.

On the 17th of February, we received rather a shock ; as, on that day, just when Bulgaria seemed to have definitely slipped under German control, the terms of a Bulgar-Turkish pact were published. They consisted of a preamble and a joint declaration by the two countries, the preamble stating that the declaration was made without prejudice to engagements entered into by the two parties with other countries, the declaration announcing that agreement had been reached on the following points : non-aggression ; good-neighbourly relations ; development of mutual trade ; reciprocal friendliness in the attitude of the Press.

The affirmation in the preamble of Turkey's intention to abide by previous obligations was satisfactory to us. Unfortunately, the declaration gave the impression, which subsequently proved to be correct, that she would stand aside if Germany were to invade Greece through Bulgaria and would do so even if Bulgaria were to join in the attack. The fact, too, that the terms of the pact were published simultaneously in Ankara, Sofia, and Berlin suggested very strongly that Germany had been the architect. Certainly, German propaganda made the most of it, proclaiming a diplomatic victory for the Axis and declaring that Turkey had deserted both England and Greece.

The final act of Bulgarian collapse took place on the 1st of March. The Prime Minister travelled to Vienna and there, at a ceremony attended by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Ciano, and the Japanese Ambassador—by representatives, that is, of all the Axis Powers, he signed the Three-Power Pact. M.

Filoff, clearly ashamed of the part he was dragooned into playing, then tried to do a little hedging. He declared that Bulgaria regarded the pact as an instrument for the preservation of a just peace and that she hoped to remain friends with all her neighbours, more especially the Soviet Union.

Ribbentrop rudely cut across these professions by declaring that the object of the pact was to 'bring Britain to her senses and force her to make peace' and proceeded to add much virulent abuse of that country in the style which the world has learned to associate with the Nazi leaders. When the pact was submitted to the Sobranje on the following day, its signature was approved with acclamation by 130 votes to 20, thus showing, by comparison with the previous attitude of that assembly, the effectiveness of German intimidation. Bulgarians, the world over, not immediately subject to this form of pressure, were disgusted. The Bulgarian Minister in London, for instance, on hearing of these events, at once resigned his appointment, just as M. Tilea, the Rumanian Minister, had done before him in like circumstances.

On the same day, the 2nd of March, strong German forces crossed the Danube by pontoon-bridges. Though long ready, they had, what with ice-floes on the river and snow in the mountains, been in no hurry to make a start. From that date onwards, they swarmed through the country.

The Russian reaction to the admission of German troops to Bulgaria was curious. In a broadcast from Moscow it was stated that, far from such a step leading to peace in the Balkans as the Bulgarian Minister supposed, it was much more likely to cause an extension of the war and the involvement

therein of Bulgaria. It was added that the Soviet Government, true to their peace policy, could not render any support whatever to the Bulgarian Government in the policy M. Filoff had adopted.

At this point, with the German occupation complete and with an invasion of Greece apparently in prospect, it may be well to examine the geography of Bulgaria and the effect its features were likely to have on the forthcoming operations.

Bulgaria is a quadrilateral, roughly about 280 by 180 miles. It is divided centrally by the great Balkan ridge—the Stara Planina, over which there are only two railway passages, one in the centre by the Shipka Pass, the scene of so much fighting between the Russians and the Turks in 1877 and connected in the Russian mind with the exploits of Gourko and his advanced guard ; and the other in the west, forming the approach by the valley of the Isker to the capital, Sofia. To the south-west and south, there rises an equally formidable range—the Rhodope Mountains, closing the approach to Greece and the Aegean and penetrated completely by no railway. Through Bulgaria, between the two ranges and mainly along the valley of the Maritza, runs the Orient Express route, affording the principal train service from Istanbul (Constantinople) to Paris. This line and the general tendency of communications, whether by rail or road, is rather east and west than north and south, for Bulgaria lies astride of the route which leads to the Bosphorus and which, since the days when it connected Rome and Byzantium, has always been the normal approach from Europe to Asia. It is easier, therefore, from the geographical point of view, for a German army in Bulgaria to invade European Turkey than to invade Greece—a fact amply



MOTOR TRANSPORT CAPTURED AT TOBRUK





DESTRUCTION BY THE R.A.F. THE REMAINS OF EIGHTY-SEVEN AIRCRAFT AT EL ADHIEM



ITALIAN PRISONERS AFTER TOBRUK



RECONNAISSANCE OVER DERNÄ

sufficient to account for the vacillations of Turkish policy at this period.

Another communication requires mention at this point, namely the offshoot from the Orient Express line which runs past the eastern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains by the valley of the Maritza and along the Greco-Turkish boundary to the sea at Dedeagatch.

Thus the geography of Bulgaria is simple, its features on the grand scale and strongly marked. To the invader from the west, it presents no great impediment ; but any advance from the north to the Aegean must pass through the ill-roaded Balkans mountains and must then aim for the Aegean either by the railway to Dedeagatch or by the line which runs south from Sofia along the Struma Valley to Rupel, inside Bulgarian territory, where it comes to an end.

The German army in Rumania, if it wished to invade Greece without entering Yugoslavia, had, therefore, first to bridge and cross the Danube, then to traverse the Balkans, always liable to be blocked by snow until the middle of March, after which it would have the choice of two lines of operation, neither of them peculiarly attractive. The more easterly would, over a long distance, run close to and parallel to the Thracian frontier of Turkey and possibly bring that country into the war were she not already involved in it. In such case, unless and until driven out of Europe, she—Turkey—would be favourably placed for striking from a flank against German communications. Furthermore, the invading force would reach the sea 160 miles, in an air-line, east of Salonika, which would form the first important German objective. The more westerly route is almost equally uninviting

and is particularly forbidding to a mechanized army. Down the Struma Valley, which is very narrow, runs a road and a metre-gauge railway. In places, road and rail pass through dangerous defiles subject to an unusual degree of effective aerial attack. A final objection to this line of advance is that the valley has a specially bad reputation for malaria.

It is possible, indeed, to diverge from the Struma Valley and strike by Nevrokop and the Mesta Valley towards Drama, but this road takes a much wider sweep and is also, though to a less extent, punctuated with defiles. Even using both roads and the railway, it is doubtful whether an army equal to a major operation such as the capture of Salonika could be maintained in Macedonia unless the opposing air force had been driven out of the sky—in this case, a most improbable occurrence.

Granting, however, that maintenance on the western route of a reasonably powerful force should prove feasible, an invader would still be faced with considerable obstacles in his advance both upon Salonika and, beyond that point, towards the capital.

Salonika is one of the key points in the Near East, from both the strategic and economic points of view. For purposes of trade, it is important to Greece and almost vital to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, both of whom have privileged positions there.

Were Germany to obtain possession of it, she would be in a position to exercise considerable additional pressure on those states ; but, from the broad strategic point of view, with Britain in command of the sea, the port would be of no great worth to her except for the two direct objects of

helping the Italians and of preventing the R.A.F. from using it as a bombing base.

Forty miles west of the Struma, and connected with it by the valley of the Strumnitza, is the approach by the Vardar through Yugoslavia to Salonika ; and, between the rivers lie the Krusa Balkans, a formidable range pierced by only one road, that through the Rupel Pass to Seres. Of the distance of 26 miles between Seres and the coast, a stretch of 22 miles is occupied by Lake Tachynos. Therefore, to a force covering Salonika against an invasion from Bulgaria, the Rupel Pass and the ranges to either flank of it offer a first position, Lake Tachynos, and thence along the Krusa Balkans to Doiran, a second, the former rather exposed, the latter well covered, with its right flank on the sea and its left on neutral territory. West of Salonika, the Vardar marshes spread 25 miles inland and are 10 miles in width. Beyond these malarial waters is a range of hills 6,000 feet high, flanked on the right by Mount Olympus.

Clearly then, the invasion of Greece from Bulgaria was a thorny problem. That, no doubt, was the cause both of the long halt of the German army in Bulgaria and of the severe pressure exercised by Hitler to compel the Regent Paul to allow the passage of his troops through Yugoslav territory.

By the occupation of Bulgaria, the Germans were, however, in a strong position and, if uncertain themselves of the next step, they were at least wielding potential threats against Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, and rendering all three of these states most anxious to know what that next step would be.

**YUGOSLAVIA.** The delicate position of Yugo-

slavia was one of the more pressing problems arising out of German infiltration into the Balkans. This Near Eastern country represents the enlargement, due to the Versailles Treaty, of our old friend, Serbia. Unfortunately for our gallant little ally of former days, increase of territory brought with it no corresponding increment either of strength or contentment. Into her enlarged boundaries were absorbed the Croat and the Slovene, both rather more advanced culturally than their partner, but dominated by him largely on account of the prestige acquired by the Serbian army in the Great War. Quarrels within the triune kingdom were incessant and were a source of recurrent weakness. The aggressions of the Axis Powers did indeed bring together the two principal adversaries—the Serbs and the Croats—but not sufficiently to enable the country to pursue a confident and consistent policy. Thus, when Italy invaded Greece and Germany occupied Rumania, Yugoslavia crouched in anxious fear of events instead of attempting to control them.

Strategically, Yugoslavia occupies one of the key positions. Over a wide stretch, she controls the Danube and the principal communications by road and rail that lead from Germany and Hungary to the Bosphorus. Moreover, what was of cardinal importance in the critical events under review, she also commands by far the easiest approach to Greece from the north. Were the German army allowed to move through the Vardar Valley and the Monastir Gap, Greece would experience the greatest difficulty in defending herself. The Vardar railway and its offshoot to and beyond Monastir are indeed single lines running for the most part through deep and narrow valleys and therefore do not lend them-

selves easily to the support of large armies. They do, however, offer marked advantages. In the first place, they encounter on their way south but few serious obstacles ; in the second place, their direction is strategically perfect ; for, at the Monastir Gap, it is possible for an army to turn not only the advanced lines of the Greeks where they face Northern Albania, but also their entrenched zones in Greek territory parallel to the Albanian frontier. Moreover, where the Vardar enters Greek territory, it flows directly towards Salonika and outflanks the Krusa Balkan range which affords that city protection against Bulgaria. Small wonder, then, that a lively interest attached to the question as to whether or not Yugoslavia had the will and the power to maintain her neutrality.

She was confronted indeed with a delicate problem ; and, up to the 25th of March, she had managed to steer clear both of enforced surrender to the Axis Powers and of invasion by them. The Government claimed to have mobilized a million men and had steadily declined to commit or allow any breach of neutrality. They had, indeed, shown themselves quite ready to sign a non-aggression pact with Germany ; and they were prepared to adhere to the Three-Power Pact, but only with the proviso that it would not imply any form of military occupation or the passage of Yugoslav territory by German troops. At times, just when they appeared to be weakening towards capitulation, a Greek victory in Albania or a British victory in Libya would stiffen their courage. It was thought by the onlooking world an especially fortunate circumstance that, shortly after Germany had occupied Bulgaria and thus encircled Yugoslavia everywhere except in the south, the Greeks should have so



decisively defeated Mussolini's loudly-heralded counterstroke. Hitler, no doubt, calculated that an Italian victory and the simultaneous appearance of a German army opposite the Rupel Pass would compel Greece without more ado to surrender, in which case Yugoslavia, completely surrounded by Axis armies and warships, would have no option but to follow her example. Germany would then have been in complete control of Continental Europe (excluding Russia) from the borders of Lithuania to Cape Matapan and from the mouths of the Danube to Bordeaux.

Hitler pursued his usual policy of seeking bloodless victories. He invited the Yugoslav Ministers to Berchtesgaden in mid-February and there, far from threatening them, stilled their apprehensions. In fact up to the 20th of March, they were still feeling strong enough to deport a former Prime Minister of pro-Nazi sympathies.

As a united body, however, they stood their ground only one day longer. Relations of Germany with Yugoslavia had been fairly friendly until she had occupied Bulgaria and thus nearly encircled her intended victim. She then began to be unpleasant and to exercise much greater pressure which, in view of her favourable strategic position and the economic bondage in which she already held the country, was not easy to resist. The result was that on the 21st of March, Prince Regent Paul and a majority of the Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, M. Tsvetkovich, and the Foreign Minister, M. Cincar Marovich, actually accepted the Nazi terms, which, though they did not include a free passage for German troops through the country, were certain, eventually, to lead thereto. It is most queer that, in

view of the slump in Axis stocks due to the passing of the Lease and Lend Bill and recent victory of the Greeks, the Government should have chosen this particular moment to surrender. Actually, three dissident Ministers did resign, and violent protests against the decisions of the Cabinet were lodged by various societies representing the Serbs, the Church, the Army, and the peasants.

The division in the Cabinet appears to have been on racial lines, the Croats and Slovenes voting for surrender and the Serbs standing out against it. There were reasons for this, apart from any hostility which might have existed between the two groups and which the Nazis would have been at pains to exploit. The Croats and Slovenes, living in the north, are mainly interested in Central Europe, both economically and because they stand there under the immediate menace of Germany. The Serbs, on the other hand, who dwell mainly in the southern area, are not in contact with Germany, and look to the Mediterranean for their trade with special regard to the exit at Salonika. Moreover, in the Great War, the Serbs were allies of Britain, whereas the Croats fought, though without enthusiasm, in the ranks of Austria as allies of Germany.

Summoned to Vienna to implement their decision, the Yugoslav Ministers entered the Belvedere Palace and there, on the 25th of March, like flies caught up in the spider's web, signed a pact which, if ratified by the nation, would have surrendered to the enemy the control of the country.

Fortunately, however, the action of the Ministers was repudiated by the people by whom it was rightly regarded as a direct betrayal. By a *coup d'état* in the early hours of the 27th of March, a new

Government was formed. King Peter, whose actions would normally have remained under the control of the Regency Council for another six months, was summoned to the Throne. At once, throughout the land, instead of mass-protests and riots, there was general rejoicing in which Church, Army, and populace were at one. Yugoslavia, as Mr. Churchill remarked, had found her soul.

General Simovich—a Serb with a distinguished record—was entrusted with the formation of the new Government. His Ministry contained not only the Serbs who had resigned their appointments when the former Ministry decided to surrender to Germany, but also Dr. Matchek, the Croat leader and former Deputy Prime Minister. Three other former Croat Ministers were also included in the Cabinet. This conjunction of Croats with Serbs, at such a critical moment, seemed most fortunate. Not only did it suggest the substantial unity of the people in a vital matter, but it apparently closed a dangerous gap into which Hitler, with his eye for a weak spot, might have hammered the wedge of Nazi intrigue.

Strategically, in the event of an attempted German invasion of Greece through Yugoslavia, it looked as if the Serbs, in their position in the Monastir Gap and the Vardar Valley, would be invaluable for covering the flank and rear of the Greek forces in Albania, and for preventing the weak flank of the defences of Salonika from being turned. Their difficulty would lie in supply; for, administratively, they were dependent on Belgrade. We, no doubt, though already burdened with the supply of groups of many nations, would have gladly afforded them help in this respect and would have been able to do so through Greece.



PASSING THROUGH DERNA



HAILE SELASSIE RETURNS

To the Allies, the change in the situation came as an immense relief. A million stout-hearted soldiers were to enter their ranks. The immediate threat to Greece was removed, and it was widely hoped that the triune kingdom might be used not only as a shield but also eventually as a sword, a land upon which, if it could be held, British and possibly American force might be developed to strike Germany where she was particularly vulnerable. Unfortunately, the unsuspected weakness of the Yugoslav army in numbers, in preparation, in equipment, and in unity was to disappoint these expectations.

**TURKEY.** The value of Turkey as an ally, with regard to the strategic importance of her position and the high military qualities of her soldiers, was discussed in the first chapter of this book. That she remained staunch to the alliance after the collapse of France, stands to her eternal credit. At that period, it will be remembered, expectation of the fall of Britain was rife, and it was widely supposed that she would at least be deprived of her dominant position in the Middle East—the theatre which naturally mattered most to Turkey. No one is more ready and eager to press a decisive advantage than Hitler ; and we may suppose, therefore, that Turkey was simply submerged under German propaganda during the dangerous period of our weakness. Nevertheless, on the 1st of November, that is six weeks before the tide began to turn in our favour in Egypt, President İnönü stoutly declared that : “ At a time when Britain is carrying on, under difficult conditions, an heroic struggle for her very existence, it is my duty to proclaim that the bonds of alliance which unite us are solid and indestructible.”

Her conduct since those days, whether as an ally or as a benevolent neutral, has not been flawless, witness her non-aggression pacts, first with Bulgaria and quite recently with Germany. The position in which she has been placed has, however, been one of immense and growing difficulty *vis-à-vis* both Russia and Germany, especially in view of the fact that she is possessed of but little modern equipment with which to enable her gallant soldiers to play their true part in war. There is no doubt either of the inner loyalty of the great majority of her people to her treaty obligations to us or of their good wishes for our success. Nevertheless, Turkey is traditionally anti-Russian and not a few of her senior officers are pro-German. Moreover, she sees Bulgaria mobilizing along her frontier and, like all the smaller powers of Europe, with the solitary and glorious exception of Greece, she has been shaken by the spectacle of a mechanized giant sweeping ruthlessly and resistlessly to her threshold. Her leaders have, therefore, been inclined to seek accommodation with the foul fiend in the vain hope of escaping thereby the fate of so many of her neighbours.

As such action in the case of other nations has invariably led to quick surrender or defeat under political or military assault, it would be unsound to place great reliance on Turkey's faculty for resistance. We should, therefore, while fortifying her will and clearly demonstrating our intention to lend her all assistance in our power, not blind ourselves to the possible danger and implications of an early collapse on her part.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE OIL WAR

**N**O ACCOUNT OF THE CONFLICT IN the Middle East would be complete without consideration of one of its principal causes, namely, the competition for oil. Oil furnished the main reason for Hitler's occupation of Rumania. It is unquestionably one of the magnets that have drawn his feet further eastwards.

Modern vehicles—ships, aircraft, tanks, lorries—which transport monstrously effective weapons with amazing speed from point to point of a theatre of war, depend for propulsion entirely on oil. Without oil, they come to a halt : aircraft are tied to the ground ; ships, if they are to move, have to be refitted to burn coal ; and the pace of armies drops from the 50 miles a day of the Libyan exploits to the 15 miles a day that ruled from Alexander to Napoleon and from Napoleon to Haig.

Oil is a necessity equally for the British Empire and for Germany. It is a principal factor in the struggle between the sea-power of the one and the land-power of the other. Sea-power guards the sources and the transit of oil destined for Britain. Land-power protects and seeks to enlarge such sources of oil as are at Germany's disposal. Of the two belligerents, the British Empire is by far the more favourably placed in this respect. So long as she controls her communications, she can draw from bottomless wells in America, Iraq and Iran.



So abundantly provided is she, in fact, that there is no need to make any detailed study of her supplies in these pages. She might, indeed, suffer grave restriction were she defeated in the Atlantic ; but then the definite loss of that battle would in any case mark the end in Britain ; for it would result in starvation for British bodies as well as British engines.

Germany, for her part, depends for her needs on a number of sources : on reserves accumulated over a long period in preparation for the war ; on a costly but extensive and much-prized home production ; and on supplies, either seized or exploited, from occupied countries.

Even with all these sources of supply available, she is, as already stated, by no means well situated in this respect. We may, therefore, with advantage examine her sources in turn. Here are her assets :

A. First, her accumulated reserves. Any estimate of them must be purely conjectural. They have been assessed by experts at 6 million tons, but, as Hitler, so far as can be judged, chanced nothing in his preparations, they may be nearer 10 million tons.

B. Home production, which has been placed at 4 million tons a year. That, again, though to a less extent, is a matter of conjecture.

C. Supplies from Russia (including Estonia and Russian-occupied Poland), which formerly amounted to  $\frac{1}{2}$  million tons a year. Perhaps 200,000 tons of that may still be available.

D. Booty, which has been estimated at 2 million tons, taken from occupied countries.

E. Rumanian oil. Rumania is the only country in German occupation possessed of supplies which are at once considerable and capable of a high

degree of further exploitation. She has a total production of about 6 million tons ; but impediments in transit to Germany are numerous : tanker tonnage on the Danube is limited ; the journey from the oil port of Giurgiu to the oil port of Regensburg covers 1,000 miles ; the river is sometimes frozen in particular areas for as much as four months in the winter ; the carrying capacity of the railway is very small. Even the German technicians who, since the occupation of the oil-fields, have been studying and feverishly attempting to solve the twin questions of increasing output and facilitating transport, do not expect, in existing conditions, that more than  $2\frac{1}{2}$  million tons will reach Germany annually, nor more than  $3\frac{1}{2}$  million tons when the improvements they recommend are completed a year or more hence. On the other hand, the greater part of the German army being now engaged against the U.S.S.R. is receiving its motive power directly from the oil-fields of Ploesti which are much better placed for the supply of troops in Russia than of troops in Germany.

On the debit side, first comes the huge item of current expenditure. That includes normal expenditure both in Germany and in German-occupied countries, reduced, of course, by strict economy of transport and by the use of substitutes, and estimated at a minimum, if essential demands on industry and agriculture in all those lands are to be fulfilled, at 10 million tons a year. In this connection, it must be remembered that robbed as well as robber are cut off from normal sources of supply—France, for instance, from American and Iraqi oil—and that Germany has therefore to provide for her victims. To normal expenditure must be added special war expenditure, a figure at which attempts

to guess would be an idle ploy, for so many factors, such as the extent to which the army is engaged in active operations, are involved. It suffices to say that, with the terrific and far-flung actions in progress by land, sea and air, expenditure must be swallowing reserves at a rapid rate.

The principal expenditure is, of course, taking place in Russia. The attack there, launched initially on a 1000-mile front, has now been extended to cover double that length. And already communications from front to rear have reached the figure of 500 miles. The Panzer divisions and the motorized divisions which, together, form a quarter of the army, depend entirely on oil for their mobility. But even the pedestrian divisions have been relying on lorry-transport and will continue to do so until the Russian railways have been relaid at normal gauge. Moreover, of the country traversed, some of the areas are boggy and others sandy, both natures of terrain which cause a heavy wastage of fuel.

Should Hitler, as the campaign proceeds, fear victory by present methods unattainable prior to the exhaustion of his petrol, he might endeavour to reach Baku by the Black Sea or by the relatively short route through Turkey. With the Caucasian oil-fields in his hand, he would deprive Russia of the sources of energy of her army, her agriculture and her industries.

The other major subtraction from German stocks is effected by the action of the British and Russian air forces in destroying storage-tanks, production-plants and refineries. Germany is, in fact, being subjected to aerial war, largely against oil, on two fronts. While the R.A.F. is dealing with the Ruhr and the great sea-ports, Russia is hammering

at the Rumanian oil-fields and refineries and can strike at production plants in eastern Germany beyond our reach. The British attack will, naturally, become increasingly effective as our air force grows under the combined impulses of British and American production and of the Empire Training Scheme.

Contrasting assets with debits in this statement of German accounts, it would seem, even allowing the widest of margins for under-estimation of the former, that Hitler, unless he can reach new sources of oil, may expect to find the balance turn against him in a not-far-distant future.

Any offensive action we could take in order still further to exhaust his stocks at this critical moment might be worth ten times the effort involved at a later period. In such action, in view of the decisive results to which it might lead, it would be not only justifiable but almost our bounden duty to take considerable risks, should it be necessary for the achievement of our purpose to do so.

The oil-situation at the moment is, in fact, the most interesting feature of the whole war. Hitler's Russian adventure is draining his resources at a rapid rate. Should our allies maintain their present solid resistance until, say, the end of October, it seems quite possible that German Panzer and motorized divisions will be brought to a standstill from lack of fuel, and that Germany will have to rely entirely on her pedestrian divisions. Against these comparatively immobile formations will be massed the Russian mechanized force, fed abundantly with oil. In such an encounter the issue should not be long in doubt.

On the other hand, should Hitler succeed in overcoming Russian resistance and in seizing the Baku

oil-fields undamaged, a vista of limitless possibilities—Persia, Afghanistan, India—would open before him. Japan would certainly then become an active partner in the Axis, and a pincer strategy might be attempted against India from East and West.

Alternatively, provided with an abundant supply of raw material in all forms and with immense productive power, the Führer could organize all Europe by sea and air for the destruction of Britain—a strategy that would evade both the perilous uncertainties inherent in an over-sea invasion and the policy, inimical to German interests in the East, of handing over Asia to Japanese hegemony.

Such are the vital issues which hang upon the battle raging on the plains of Russia.

Italy comes into the oil picture only as a further handicap to her ally. Her reserves in Libya and East Africa, in so far as they have not been exhausted in use, have, to a great extent, been destroyed by the British air forces and, even in Libya, can hardly be replaced. In the home country, too, reserves which, owing to lack of foreign exchange, cannot have been accumulated on the grand scale, have suffered at least some diminution from aerial and naval bombardments. Moreover, there must have been a fairly heavy expenditure of oil in the operations in Albania which lasted six months without a break and during which the Italians have made a considerable use of tanks. On the other hand, the Italian sailors have displayed a praiseworthy economy by keeping their warships more or less permanently in harbour.

¶ As Italy has no external sources of oil on which to draw, except for the paltry amount in Albania, she will have to depend on Germany for replacements as soon as she shall have exhausted her own

stocks ; and that dependence, we may be sure, will not make for harmony in the alliance.

In general, then, in the conflict in which we are engaged, oil is likely to play a vital part, in the true sense of that overworked adjective.

The first world war was variously described as an artillery war, an engineer war, a tank war. It looks as if the second and, we hope, the last of the series, will be known as an oil war, or, perhaps, the oil war.

A final point to close this chapter. Oil furnishes the fuel for the engines of motorized vehicles. It can, however, do nothing for the disabled vehicle until the latter has been repaired. Therefore, rate of disablement, whether by enemy action or by wear and tear, conditions the efficiency of a highly-motorized army almost as much as does the supply of oil. Even in a victorious attack, losses may be considerable. In a partial success against a well-equipped enemy who is offering a stern resistance, they would be considerably greater. Therefore, destroyed or disabled German tanks probably clutter the vast plains of Russia ; and German ordnance repair-shops and factories must be working at highest pitch to keep even a moderate number of armoured fighting vehicles in the field. Should they fail in their endeavours, Panzer divisions might be reduced to scrap-iron even before their oil-supplies petered out. Thus, every fresh hour of Russian resistance brings nearer the defeat of the Germans both by the destruction of their principal weapon and by the exhaustion of its motive power. There are as yet no definite signs of weakness ; but the tremendous scale of battle, provided it persists, can hardly fail to bring about an attenuation of strength in these two vital spheres.

## CHAPTER XV

### VICTORIES AND DEFEATS

IT IS TIME NOW TO TURN TO THEATRES in which the Forces of the Empire were directly engaged ; and the 27th of March is a suitable date on which to make the change, for, on that day, not only did Yugoslavia rebut the Axis, but Platt captured Keren, Cunningham reached Harar and the movements which led to the victory at Cape Matapan were initiated.

The army invading Eritrea, it will be remembered, was brought to a halt in front of Keren on the 4th of February ; and, not until seven weeks later, did our troops storm that great natural citadel. The Italians, under the Duke of Aosta, disposing of superior force and making full use of the strength of the position, put up what was perhaps their finest fight in the war. Over and over again our infantry, scaling the steep heights, would carry their objectives ; but, blown and exhausted with their great exertions, they would prove easy prey to the counter-attacks of fresh and active enemy reserves. Eventually, however, when Indian sappers and miners, working most gallantly, had cleared the way of mines for mechanized forces and had repaired the road up to the town, assault by tanks in co-operation with Highlanders and Indian infantry won the stronghold. The *finale* was something of an anti-climax, for the enemy main body, numbering some 40,000 troops, had

already departed, leaving a rearguard to cover its retreat.

On the 1st of April, Asmara, the capital, a town containing 50,000 Italians, was captured and, on the 7th of April, Massawa, Italy's principal colonial seaport, on which she had lavished millions, fell into our hands. Platt's force then struck south over the plateau until it was brought to a halt by serious opposition in the fortified heights about Amba Alagi. Meanwhile, Cunningham, after leaving Harar, had taken possession of Diré Dawa, the third town in Abyssinia and the principal station on the French-owned railway that runs from Djibuti to Addis Ababa. There he managed to save from massacre, at the hands of the Italian colonial levies, a considerable number of Italian women and children. Pursuing his advance rapidly through country offering every facility for defence, he broke through the Hawash defile with hardly a pause and, on the 5th of April, only eight days after leaving Diré Dawa, captured Addis Ababa, the capital. At this point his force was dangerously isolated ; but, luckily, the Italians took no advantage of their opportunity. The tempo of operations now began to slow down considerably, partly because of the advent of the rains and partly because Wavell had, in order to reinforce his other fronts, begun to withdraw troops from Abyssinia, including the gallant South Africans to whom permission had just been given to fight in Egypt. Thus it was not until the 20th of May that Amba Alagi, encircled by forces from north and south, was captured. The prisoners taken there numbered 19,000 and included the Duke of Aosta, who had done much to inspire resistance in the later phases of the campaign. By this time, owing to the rains,



plains had turned to swamps ; the bottom had fallen out of roads ; streams had become raging torrents ; rivers rushing through gorges, a thousand feet deep and more, were passable only after weeks of preparation. The greatest credit is therefore due to the troops concerned for conquering the formidable obstacles placed in their path by nature and, at the same time, inflicting defeat after defeat on a numerous and well-equipped foe. In the area about Gimma, south-west of Addis Ababa, which was taken on the 22nd of June, 30,000 prisoners and 100 guns were captured. By that time, of the Italian army in East Africa there remained only the garrison of Gondar and a small detachment which had escaped from Assab when that port was seized.

In the North African victories, from Sidi Barrani to Solluk, in which 150,000 Italians were captured, the British forces deployed for battle never numbered more than 30,000. In Abyssinia the numerical disparity was equally striking. The force at Cunningham's disposal at no time exceeded 20,000 infantry and 68 guns. Of these it is said that, owing to difficulties of maintenance, it was never possible to employ more than three brigades at a time in any one offensive operation. Platt disposed of even smaller numbers. Yet the two commanders between them managed to destroy an army of 170,000 men, of whom 96,000 were infantry, with 400 guns.

The third striking success achieved at the end of March was the naval victory of Cape Matapan. Warned by the R.A.F. of a sortie by the Italian fleet eastward, Sir Andrew Cunningham, then harbouring at Alexandria, moved swiftly to the attack. In the ensuing battle he sunk three 10,000-

ton cruisers and two destroyers. He also severely damaged the battleship *Littorio*. The fleet lost two aircraft but otherwise suffered no casualties and sustained no damage—a result unique in naval annals. The battle was remarkable for the excellent reconnaissance of the R.A.F., the Fleet Air Arm and the light surface craft and their close co-operation with the battleships. The latter only succeeded in closing with the enemy at dusk. Their targets were then illumined by the searchlights of destroyers and, by a marvel of accurate gunnery, sent to the bottom in a few minutes. The damage to the *Littorio* was the work of aircraft. At daybreak, British warships, which were busy endeavouring to save Italian sailors, were forced to desist by the attack of German aircraft. The Admiral then signalled for the despatch from Brindisi of rescue parties, who managed on arrival to succour a number of their compatriots. In consequence, Sir Andrew received a message of thanks from Italian naval headquarters—not a matter of great importance, perhaps, but noteworthy as one of the very rare exchanges of courtesy in this bitter and bloody war.

After Matapan came a sudden shift in our fortunes. Not, indeed, as calamitous as that which followed the restful winter in France of 1939-40, but nevertheless pregnant with dangerous and unpleasant possibilities.

The first shock to hopeful feeling was caused by the sudden and unexpected appearance of German armoured forces in western Cyrenaica. It had been generally thought impossible, with Britain master, to a great extent, both on the sea and in the air, for any large hostile mechanized formation to cross the Mediterranean, even at its narrowest

point. Moreover, our position at Al Aghaila was regarded as particularly strong. The single approach to it from Tripoli was flanked on one side by the sea and on the other by semi-desert and, therefore, appeared easily defensible except against tracked vehicles in which the Italians, after their heavy losses in Cyrenaica, were known to be weak.

Apparently, however, only a single mechanized brigade was watching this approach, the remainder of the armoured division having been withdrawn in part for despatch to Greece and, in part, for very necessary refitment after its arduous campaign.

German armoured forces, acting as the advanced guard of a larger army that was yet to cross, and not much stronger than our outpost brigade, successfully surprised the latter at Al Aghaila and threw it back in confusion at Agedabia. Behind that point, where they could cover the head of the defile and the eventual approach of the main body that was to follow, they had, in the first instance, no intention of advancing. So unexpectedly easy, however, had been their success that their commander decided to exploit the opportunity and, in lieu of organized arrangements for a forward movement, to make the enemy his supply-agent. He appears to have struck in two directions : along the coast to Benghazi and south of the Green Mountain by Mekili, the exact converse of Wilson's earlier stroke that led to the victory of Solluk. A British division in Benghazi, which was an unfortified town, managed to escape in time and fell back on Tobruk, where it reinforced the existing garrison and remained to threaten the flank of any German advance towards Egypt. Meanwhile, the Germans had succeeded at Mekili and Cerna in capturing three of our generals and 2,000 men, had occupied

Bardia and Sollum, and had reached a line a few miles beyond the Egyptian frontier. By that time, they and their Italian allies had, for the moment, shot their bolt, and they appear to have decided to treat their new position as an outpost behind which larger forces could be built up for the invasion of Egypt. In this respect they have found Tobruk a thorn in the flesh. They have, therefore, launched upon it several fierce attacks, all of which have been repelled with severe losses. Only one success have they counted : the capture of part of the southwestern corner of the outer line of the fortress. On the other hand, General Morshead, the Australian commander in Tobruk, has made several enterprising sorties, in the course of which he has taken some 3,000 prisoners. At the same time, light British mechanized forces covering Wavell's main army, have not only maintained close contact with the invaders, but have made several raids round their right flank, capturing prisoners and guns.

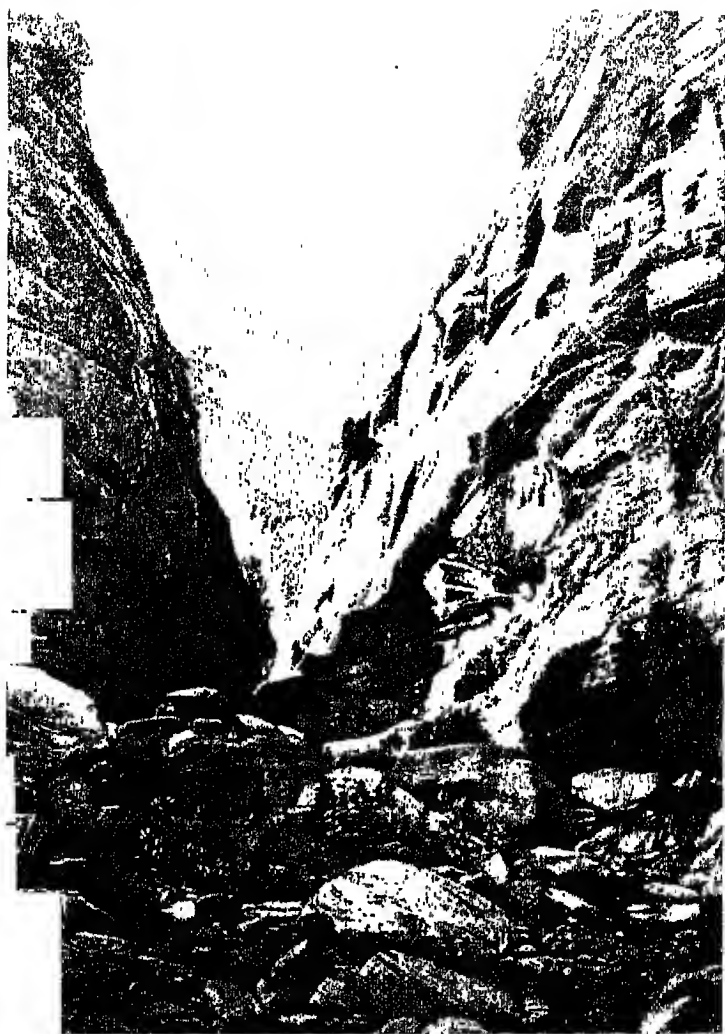
Tobruk furnishes an excellent example of a position to a flank such as that at Plevna, where Osman Pacha forced a halt upon the Russians, whose leading troops were then beyond the Balkans streaking happily for Constantinople. Another example was furnished by Stonewall Jackson when, by falling back eastwards from the Shenandoah Valley, he prevented the Federals from marching on Staunton. It is, however, essential to this form of operation that the commander shall keep open his line of communications. Osman Pacha's sting was drawn when he allowed himself to be surrounded ; whereas the confederate leader refused to permit his freedom of manœuvre to be restricted and remained in consequence a power to be reckoned with.

The position in North Africa at the moment is substantially unchanged. The air force, including the South African air force, have been hammering hard at ports, aerodromes and lines of communication, and the navy have been sinking transports and supply ships. The enemy must, therefore, have found maintenance very difficult and can never have been able to build up the reserves necessary for a deep offensive movement. He may still retain considerable strength on the Egyptian frontier, however, for when on the 16th of June Wavell launched a reconnaissance-in-force to ascertain if any troops had been withdrawn to the Russian front, he encountered powerful German forces. Both the activity and the morale of the Empire forces in that quarter, as shown by the successful raids recently carried out, are, however, higher than those of the enemy ; and it would, therefore, not be surprising in the near future were we to undertake once more the conquest of Libya. Weather conditions are not favourable at the moment because of the intense heat ; but operations become possible about the 15th of September, on which date therefore we may find our troops again moving westwards.

Having dealt with Africa, we may now turn to Europe. The situation in Yugoslavia when King Peter ascended the throne and General Simovich became Prime Minister, was not nearly so good as it appeared to the uninstructed observer. There had been repeated reports to the effect that the Yugoslav army, numbering one million men, had by that time been fully mobilized and was ready for action. It was realized, indeed, that it was terribly short of modern equipment, and it was accordingly expected that it would be unable to put up a strong



GALLABAT—CAPTURED



AN ABYSSINIAN HIGH-ROAD

resistance against German dive-bombers and tanks in the open plains to the north of the country where those weapons could be employed with full effect. In that area, also, there was a strong likelihood of the appearance of quislings and fifth-columnists among the Croats and Slovenes, for Hitler was certain to have sought profit from the divisions in the triune kingdom. In the southern portion, however, in the mountains of ancient Serbia, where tanks and cognate weapons would be at a disadvantage, it was expected that the army, especially the hardy and gallant Serb in his native hills, would be able, largely by the use of demolitions in a land where roads were few and movement off them difficult, to oppose the enemy most effectively ; and in doing so, he would cover the flank and rear of the Greek army in Albania and the approach to Salonika by the Vardar Valley. In fact, as already mentioned, the more sanguine had hopes that combined British, Greek and Yugoslav forces would be able to maintain themselves in Albania, southern Yugoslavia and Salonika, and might, later, as their strength and equipment increased, oust the Italians from Albania and strike at the German communications with the east.

Unfortunately, however, the Yugoslav army was not only ill-equipped but also unready. Its mobilization was very far from complete and it had made practically no arrangements to block even the more difficult passes to mechanized invaders. Such troops as were available were strung in cordon fashion along the frontier and were weak everywhere. The fact is that, until General Simovich's Government came into power, no serious attempt had been made to organize resistance. The fault lay not with the soldiers but with the politicians



who betrayed them. The fatal policy of trying to appease a hungry tiger instead of slaying him, proved the bane of Yugoslavia, as it had done with so many other small nations. Unhappily it also sounded the death-knell of the gallant Greeks, who had set such a noble example by refusing to bow their necks to the yoke of the aggressor.

The bulk of the Yugoslav army fought in the north along the Save. It was defeated not only because of lack of equipment but also because it contained large numbers of senior Croat officers who hankered after old days when they clanked it with the best in Vienna. In consequence, there were numerous mutinies, key bridges were not destroyed and the quislings, by their sinister influence, once more proved too strong for the fighting patriots. In other quarters the Yugoslav army fared no better.

The defence of Salonika was based on excellent positions through the Rupel Pass blocking the Struma Valley which furnished the principal direct approach from Bulgaria into Greece. To the west there should have been a powerful Yugoslav army guarding the difficult approach from Bulgaria into Yugoslavia by the Strumnitza Valley. Instead, there was only a weak and unprepared detachment which melted away before the German onset and admitted the invaders into the Vardar Valley, thereby enabling the latter to turn the western flank of the defenders of Salonika by that easy approach. The fate of the Greek divisions of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace was thus sealed.

At the other main approach to Greece—the Monastir Gap—there was further failure which produced even more calamitous results ; for it allowed the Germans to reach the right flank and

rear of the Greek army operating in Albania. British and Greek forces were indeed preparing to hold the Gap, but they were thin on the ground, and the Greeks were wretchedly equipped for a battle against their armoured opponent.

Yugoslavia was, indeed, very difficult to defend owing to the immense length of her frontier, along which, in Albania, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria, lay German divisions ready to march. She was possessed, too, about Skoplje of an unfortunate waist—a mere 100 miles wide between Albania and Bulgaria—which offered to an invader the opportunity of severing the relatively rich northern area, which contained the principal establishments of the Government, the army and the air force, from the strong but ill-furnished south. In spite of these geographical drawbacks, however, we may be sure that the Yugoslav army would have put up a splendid fight had they been made reasonably ready for the fray. We may yet find them, and shall be right glad to find them, fighting on our side in some mammoth uprising against the oppression of the Hun.

To the Greeks, after their magnificent fight with the Italians, the invasion of the Germans and the quick collapse of the Yugoslavs were cruel blows. For six long months they had battled in the vilest of weather against superior numbers and equipment. Through all that long period the world had resounded with the tale of their valour ; and now, through no fault of their own, they would be forced to retreat, and all the sacrifices and the hardships they had endured would be rendered vain.

Unhappily, at this critical phase, they do not appear to have received all the support they deserved

from higher authority. The King and a large part of the Government proclaimed, indeed, unhesitating and determined opposition to the wanton aggression of the Hun ; but, in other high places, there were evidently a number of fifth columnists and quislings. The military observer, studying on the map the daily movements of armies, was amazed, in view of the threat to their flank and rear, at the long delay of the Greeks in Albania. At first, it was supposed that, having beaten the Italians so often, they could not bear retreating before their despised opponents and relinquishing the gains they had won at the cost of so much toil and blood. But, when the Germans pushed over the Pindus Mountains and cut in by Metsovo and Janina upon their communications, and when the army that had hitherto fought so magnificently, then and there laid down its arms, after the signing of an armistice unauthorized by the Government, grave doubts arose as to the loyalty of some of the military leaders. It is, indeed, hardly conceivable that generals who had hitherto shown a fine grasp both of strategy and tactics should have failed to realize the certain implication of the piercing of the Monastir Gap by hostile mechanized divisions to whose power and speed so many a recent campaign had testified. In the immediate theatre of action, the great spinal ridge could be traversed by wheeled vehicles only at the pass of Metsovo. It was, therefore, obviously incumbent upon the Greek leaders, with their flank threatened, to sacrifice everything to the need of reaching the Metsovo-Janina road before their opponents. They failed to do so because, with what seemed traitorous deliberation, they dallied by the way. That suspicion was not wholly misplaced is implicit in the

fact that three of the generals concerned have since been deprived of their rank.

In a broadcast message to his people informing them of his intention of transferring the capital and Government to Crete, there to continue the struggle, King George declared that: "We still do not know the real reasons why the Army of the Epirus signed an armistice with the enemy without our knowledge and without the cognisance of the Commander-in-Chief and the Government."

In the centre of the line, on and east of the Pindus Mountains, the tremendous disparity between German and Greek equipment rendered the struggle impossibly uneven. No valour could bridge so wide a gap, and so the gallant Greeks covering the British left flank were driven southwards in disorder. It became clear, in fact, that the campaign was drawing to a sad close. The Greek Government recognized the tragedy as inevitable and, as a last chivalrous act, after expressing their gratitude for the aid rendered, they invited the British Expeditionary Force to withdraw, since 'further sacrifice would be vain.' At the same time they promised to help to the end in covering the evacuation.

The British contribution to the battle in the Greek peninsula consisted of three divisions—two Anzac and one British—and one armoured brigade, totalling nearly 58,000 troops, of whom approximately 34,000 were Australian and New Zealanders and 24,000 British. The army was assisted by such aircraft as could be spared from other theatres. Not only, however, was the R.A.F. greatly outnumbered by its opponents, but, in contrast to the latter, who had at their disposal near at hand plenty of open country, it suffered, owing to con-

fined space, the mountainous nature of the terrain and the muddy conditions prevailing where level ground existed, from a grave lack of aerodromes. In fact, once the plain of Thessaly had been abandoned, air-support had to be rendered almost entirely from Crete at a distance from the army three to four times greater than that which the German pilots had to fly. In studying the campaign in Greece, this fact must be continually borne in mind, for it had an adverse effect on the British troops in every act of their fierce battles, at every step of their arduous marches.

The British Expeditionary Force, under Sir Maitland Wilson, landed in Greece about the middle of March and, therefore, had some three weeks in which to reconnoitre positions, and plan and prepare for the impending conflict. Up to the 26th of March they had no expectation of assistance from the Yugoslav army. From the 27th onwards they presumed that their new allies would cover the approaches by the Vardar Valley and the Monastir Gap. This change, which seemed at the outset all to the good, had an unfortunate repercussion.

Strong Greek forces had been placed at and east of Florina with a view to covering the Monastir Gap. On hearing of the Simovich *coup d'état*, the Greek Commander-in-Chief thought the Gap to be adequately defended by the Serbs. He, accordingly, removed a large part of the Greek forces assembled there and despatched them to hold the narrow strip of Macedonia and Thrace, east of Salonika—a territory which would not otherwise have been defended and, with Bulgaria hostile, was not, in fact, defensible.

This was a grave strategic error. It resulted in the useless sacrifice of many thousands of Greek

troops and, with the collapse of Yugoslavia, it opened the best of all approaches to the Germans. Moreover, it considerably weakened the support that would otherwise have been afforded to the British left, no doubt causing General Wilson acute anxiety on that score.

The story of the five weeks' battle from the 9th of April to the 2nd of May is, in the absence of detailed information, largely based on guesswork. The first line held by the British was apparently intended to prevent enemy penetration both by the Monastir Gap and by road and rail through Thessaly to Athens. Its right rested on the sea at Katerina. From that point it ran across the Vistritza at Veria and reached towards Edessa, being protected to some extent in the whole of this area by the Vistritza and Vardar marshes. The left joined the Greek right near Florina. Just south of this town there occurred the first serious clash between British and German troops since the Battle of Dunkirk. On the 9th of April, German mechanized and motorized divisions, breaking through the Gap, attacked the British left, which consisted of a mixed brigade group composed mainly of Australian troops. Heavy fighting followed which lasted for two days, at the end of which the brigade, after a valorous resistance, was compelled to retire. General Wilson had then, in order to avoid being outflanked, to make fresh dispositions. He withdrew his right to Mount Olympus, brought his centre behind the bend in the Vistritza and extended his left along a range of mountains running west towards Metsovo. Here the forces of the Empire held on with indomitable courage until the 16th. Here, too, most of them experienced, for the first time, the full effect of

dive-bombers in overwhelming numbers employed as artillery. Here, furthermore, they were forced to realize the tremendous advantages possessed by fully mechanized formations over pedestrian and motorized troops.

Many epic combats took place during this period, especially on the lower slopes of Mount Olympus and on the front of the New Zealanders who held the defiles between that massive feature and the sea. It was, however, also a period of untoward events. By the 15th, the Greek divisions east of the Pindus Mountains had practically ceased to exist. On the 16th, the Yugoslav army surrendered *en bloc*; and it was on the following day that a defeatist broadcast from Athens revealed for the first time the presence of quislings among the politicians.

On the 17th, the Allied forces began a gradual retirement to a shorter line. One Australian brigade, posted at Kalabaka, protected the left flank against envelopment during the retirement and helped to cover the road to Metsovo by which the Germans could strike across the mountains against the rear of the Greek army in Albania. The centre and right were covered respectively by an Australian and a New Zealand brigade assisted by the one armoured brigade. The retiring troops, in order to reach their new positions, had to traverse the plains of Thessaly, the passage of which relatively open and easy country was particularly dangerous to forces suffering from marked inferiority in armoured fighting vehicles; but thanks to the fine fighting of the covering brigades, their aim was successfully accomplished. The rearguards, however, had a very tough task. While they were being pressed closely in front,



ITALIAN SAPPERS BUILDING TEMPORARY BRIDGE





A VALLEY ON THE PLATEAU



A BEAU GESTE FORI



THE WAR-DRUM CALLS TO ARMS

parachutists and air-borne guns were dropped across their path, and armoured forces turning their flanks forestalled them in the possession of Larissa—the centre of all communications in Thessaly. Nevertheless, though with considerable loss, those stout-hearted men hewed a path through their enemies and rejoined the main body in its fresh positions south of Lamia, close to which town a modern Thermopylæ was soon to be fought. The new line between the Aegean and the Gulf of Corinth was short and strong. It was only forty miles in length and was embedded in difficult mountains. There, aided by such few Greeks as remained, the Empire forces were able to repel a succession of assaults.

On the 21st of April, however, the Greek Government was forced to recognize that their army, after more than six months of victorious struggle against strongly superior enemy forces "had now reached a state of exhaustion," and, moreover, found itself "completely deprived of certain resources indispensable for the pursuit of war, such as munitions, motorized vehicles, and aeroplanes." Regarding as vain sacrifice any further struggle on the mainland, they issued a note, as already mentioned, inviting the British Expeditionary Force in the common interest to evacuate the country.

The forces of the Empire began their final withdrawal on the 22nd—the day on which the Army of the Epirus capitulated. The German radio and press thundered threats against them: there would be no second Dunkirk; not a British soldier would escape, and so forth. At the same time, the German airmen claimed to have sunk dozens of our transports. Certainly the situation was tense with difficulty and peril. The mountainous nature

of the country, however, and the fine fighting of a fresh rearguard, which held on to the Bralos Pass until the 24th to cover the retirement, facilitated the task of the main body ; and, on the beaches, the Royal Navy and the Merchant Marine, as in every other operation in this war, rendered devoted and unsparing help in spite of the ceaseless bombing of every likely point of re-embarkation.

Towards the close of the battle, the Germans staged a spectacular and successful feat. They dropped some 2,000 parachutists south of Corinth as the last bodies of our troops were crossing from the mainland into the Peloponnese, intending to embark at Nauplia. By doing so, they forced the latter to abandon their intention and carry out their embarkation at other more dangerous points.

Eventually, 45,000 out of our original 58,000 were safely evacuated. Thus we suffered 13,000 casualties in the campaign and, of them, some 4,000 were killed and wounded in the actual fighting. We had, indeed, been severely defeated ; but, that over 75 per cent of the force should have escaped from such a perilous situation is a high tribute to the valiant fighting and high discipline of the troops themselves, to the splendid work of the Navy and Merchant Service and to the protection afforded on the sea voyage by the R.A.F. It also reflects great credit on the commanders and the staffs concerned. Throughout the whole five weeks, during a period of intense fighting in an unknown, mountainous and ill-roaded country, which was suffering from ceaseless bombing, every operation, so far as can be judged from the meagre reports available, was carried out like clockwork. Sir Maitland Wilson and Sir Thomas Blamey may

well be proud both of their leadership and of the troops they led. Scarcity of men and equipment has been our bane since the war began ; but that is a fault attributable not to the soldier but to the nation as a whole for its lack of adequate preparation during the long period of warning prior to the war and the nine months that immediately succeeded the outbreak of hostilities.

It is possible that this description of the campaign shows our actions in too favourable a light, and that a number of mistakes will be revealed later, mistakes being inseparable from war. One rather surprising point that requires some elucidation is the ease and speed with which the enemy's highly motorized and mechanized troops managed to move along mountain roads. Just as the Italians delayed us in East Africa, it might have been supposed that, by a skilful use of demolitions, we might have very seriously impeded the German advance. Were we short of sappers or was there a lack of high explosives or, again, are our sappers not sufficiently trained in this form of warfare ?

The last theatre on which we shall touch in this chapter is that of Iraq. It was interesting to hear from the Prime Minister that we have been cognisant of Rashid Ali's nefarious activities for a whole year past. We, therefore, had made arrangements, no doubt, to meet the various eventualities that might occur. Certainly, the despatch of the Indian Brigade Group to Basra was an excellent move. Without doubt, it frustrated the usurper's intended operation of sweeping the British from the land by a sudden *coup*. It also had a sedative effect on southern Iraq, secured the safety of the aerodrome at Basra and afforded, by its proximity, some protection to the Anglo-Iranian oilfields. We

may count ourselves lucky, however, that, when Rashid Ali did come into the open, he failed in his first object of capturing our aerodrome at Dhuban, near Lake Habaniya. This rich prize lay only sixty miles by a good road from the headquarters of the Iraq army at Baghdad. The distance might easily have been covered by motorized troops in the night and a heavy surprise attack executed at dawn, under conditions of terrain peculiarly favourable to the assailants. Fortunately for us, the Iraqi military leaders proved to be inefficient to a quite amazing degree. This is often the case in the Iraqi army. The Arab soldier is excellent material and would always give a good account of himself if well led. His officers, however, are largely drawn, not from the fighting tribesmen but, on account of their better education, from the effeminate, irreligious *effendi* class in the towns, many of them intriguers, lazy, and venal. There are, of course, numerous first-class officers. Nuri Pacha was a good soldier in his early days. So was our old friend Ja'far Pacha, and his murderer Bekr Sidki. It is not always, however, the efficient men who rise to the top, but the men with a family or political pull.

The Iraqis, by missing their opportunity, gave us time to reinforce the beleaguered garrison which, until then, had, according to our Prime Minister, been hanging on by its eyelids. Troops appear to have been flown both from Basra and Palestine to its assistance, with the result that it was able to take the offensive and drive the besiegers off the dominating ground they had occupied, capturing, in the process, six 18 pounders, six 3.7-in. howitzers, and quantities of other war material. Incidentally, as the Iraqi army is furnished with British weapons,

all equipment taken from it can at once be put to profitable use.

Our aircraft, having had a fortunate escape from being blown to pieces by Iraqi guns, also took the offensive quickly. Not only did they effectively bomb the besiegers but they also destroyed the greater part of the Iraqi Air Force in its aerodromes near Baghdad, and attacked Iraqi garrisons in their barracks from Mosul to Diwaniya.

It is maddening to have to do these things against a people among whom we have many friends and with whom we have no quarrel and against an army which we have created. We conquered, organized, and administered the country for the Iraqi. We trained him in the arts of government and defence. As soon as he appeared fit to rule, we relinquished control, gave him complete independence, and made a treaty with him on generous terms from which he has drawn full benefit. We have since protected that independence by keeping an air force in the country whose chief *raison d'être* was to guard the kingdom from external aggression. What was his reply? He repudiated the treaty and attacked us at a moment when we were suffering severe reverses elsewhere. We have deserved many of our misfortunes in this war, but not that; for, in our connection with the Land of the Two Rivers we have behaved with scrupulous justice and generosity. It is a sad reflection upon human nature that Hitler finds it far easier to gain and keep allies by bribery, corruption, and intimidation than we do in playing the game by them.

At first, the Germans rendered considerable help by air to Rashid Ali; but, as soon as the struggle in Crete began, all their energies and the whole aerial force at their disposal were concen-



trated on the attempt to conquer that island. The fine fighting of Freyberg's garrison had, therefore, the very useful effect of enabling us, with the exiguous forces at our disposal, to occupy Baghdad, Mosul, and the oil-fields at Kirkuk, to expel the rebel Ministers from the country and to restore the Emir Abdul Ilah to his office as Regent. By the terms of the armistice arranged, Iraq retains her independence. The situation there will, however, need continual watching, for the revolt clearly showed the considerable influence which the Germans, through their gold, their intrigues, and their victories, had won over the country. It is probable, therefore, that we shall have to keep considerable forces in garrison. We cannot allow our land-communications with the East and our precious oil-supply to be endangered.

## CHAPTER XVI

### CRETE AND SYRIA

THE BATTLE OF CRETE OPENED ON THE 20th of May, eighteen days after the evacuation from Greece. We appear to have had a garrison there of 27,500<sup>1</sup> men, including 13,500 Australians and New Zealanders. But numbers in this case furnish no true criterion of strength ; for there was but little artillery, either field or anti-aircraft, available, and many of our troops had been landed on the island after having been driven out of Greece and were, in consequence, woefully short of equipment. Moreover, among them were included many soldiers belonging to such corps as the R.A.S.C. and R.A.O.C. who, though admirable in the discharge of duties in their own spheres, possessed neither the training nor the equipment adequate for a bitter and lengthy struggle against high-class opponents. In addition to the forces of the Empire, there was at least one division of Greek troops ; and well it fought.

The struggle for mastery, as in almost all episodes in this war, turned largely upon relative aerial strength. Unfortunately for us, whereas there were, on the island, only three small aerodromes—one at Maleme near Canea and the others at Rethymno and Heraklion, farther east along the northern

<sup>1</sup> Including men evacuated from Greece and not re-evacuated to Egypt before operations in Crete.

coast, the Germans, the ground having dried up, could utilize about nine good aerodromes on the mainland, the nearest point of which was only 90 miles away.

This uneven distribution was certain to impose a very severe strain on the air force, which, moreover, had many other commitments in the Middle East. A decision was reached, therefore, to withdraw it from Crete. That decision practically deprived the army there of all aerial support ; for the nearest Egyptian aerodrome was 350 miles away—a distance beyond the capacity of the fighter and thus of the escorted day-bomber. It subjected both the army and the navy operating in Crete and in Cretan waters to an intolerable handicap.

The Germans opened the action with a heavy aerial bombardment, following it up with the landing of air-borne troops by troop-carriers, by gliders, and by parachutes, at and near the three aerodromes.

Brigadier Ingles, who fought in Crete and returned to England after the operations to report upon them, stated that where parachutists were dropped near our troops, they proved an easy prey, as many as 80 per cent being killed before reaching the ground, but, where they landed at a distance and were able, relatively undisturbed, to arm, assemble, and organize, they became a formidable menace. Many of the troop-carriers were shot down and many more crashed badly on landing ; but, despite losses, they kept arriving in successive clouds in vast numbers, the great majority of them disgorging their contents successfully. The British navy succeeded in preventing any landing from the sea, so that the German



BRITISH CONVOYS FOR THE PATRIOTS



IN KENYA'S DESERT—MEN OF THE GOLD COAST

attack was, in the first instance, of a purely vertical nature. It fell, like rain, all round the defenders who, between attacks, were subjected to bursts of dive-bombing. In this fashion the battle continued for some twelve days. The situation then was such that it had become almost impossible, owing to enemy aerial superiority, to despatch reinforcements to our troops, and that the Germans, continually receiving additions by air to their strength, were gradually obtaining the upper hand. Moreover, our fleet, in its devoted and successful actions against German convoys, had lost four cruisers and six destroyers through aerial attack from near-by aerodromes. As it could afford no further casualties, it would have to withdraw and thus leave the coast of Crete unprotected against sea-borne troops. These conditions rendered it certain that a further continuance of the struggle would result in a useless loss of valuable lives. The force was accordingly extricated, not without extreme difficulty, and, under the cover furnished by a gallant body of the Royal Marines, embarked at southern ports. About 15,000 of the garrison succeeded in reaching Egypt.

The struggle in Crete provided some of the fiercest hand-to-hand fighting of the whole war. Perhaps one of the most interesting commentaries on it was given in a broadcast by General Quade of the *Luftwaffe*. 'Had the British succeeded,' he said, 'in cutting our life-line between Greece and Crete, had we been unable to secure an air-field soon after the first parachute-landings, the capture of Crete could not have been accomplished. It was a tough, a very tough job.'

The subject of the battle for this island of ancient civilizations has been hotly debated both in and out of Parliament. With the decision to hold it,

reached after the evacuation of Greece, there was general agreement, for which the several reasons may be noted. In the first place, Crete was regarded as of great value as a naval base in a region where harbours equal to holding battleships were scarce. In the second place, it seemed possible that the island might be used as an offensive outpost from which, at some future date, the independence of Greece might be re-established. Then there was an expectation, which events were but narrowly to justify, that the navy would prevent sea-borne attack. Finally, the *Luftwaffe*, remarkable as had been its achievements, had not hitherto succeeded, through aerial attack and aerial transport, in winning a victory 'off its own bat.' Perhaps the best point was made by Mr. Churchill himself, when he asked where the Germans would now be and how our prestige would be standing, had we abandoned place after place without a struggle.

The criticisms in the debate in the House were levelled in fact not against our strategy but rather against the methods adopted by the defenders. The principal charge was that the problem of defence had been examined in compartments. At first, it was intended that all three services should as usual operate in unison—the army in garrison, the navy controlling the narrow seas, and the air force in support of its comrade-services. The decision, reached later, to withdraw the R.A.F., though all three service-chiefs may have concurred in it, had relevance solely to considerations of security for one of three partners who are truly strong only in combination. It was as mistaken as would have been a decision to withdraw gun-support from infantry on the point of assaulting a fortified position. The incident clearly shows that,

though much has been written on the subject, we have failed to envisage the need for a central executive control of the fighting forces, and nothing showed more clearly our failure in this respect than the broadcast of the accredited representative of the Air Ministry. "Crete," he said, "as far as we are concerned, must be the business of soldiers and sailors." As if any operation, on which hopes of victory are set, can be staged to-day without an air force.

A second main criticism was that, though we had been in occupation of the island for seven months, we had done nothing to enlarge our aerodromes and increase their number; nor had we prepared them for destruction or made other arrangements to deny to the enemy the possibility of using them. Here, again, the fault, apart from lack of equipment, derives from the same source. Who was responsible in this matter of aerodromes—the army or the air force? Undoubtedly both were responsible, the army mainly for protection, the air force mainly for enlargement; but the borders of their respective responsibilities were not easy to define. The writer can speak with bitter experience of the evils of divided control. In operations conducted by him and by an air force commander, each controlling their separate forces, every agreed plan had to be reached through painful compromise, and, though there was no discord, objectives were viewed by the parties concerned from different angles. On such occasions, it is not co-operation but co-ordination that is needed. A single commander in control of both forces would have brought the particular campaigns to a successful conclusion much earlier than was the case with the disjointed effort. It is true that the lesson has been



partially learned, witness the appointment of an Air Chief Marshal to command the combined forces in the Far East. Nowhere else, however, has it yet been applied ; nor will any application prove fully successful, where central control in an area does not derive from central control at the fountain of authority.

The invasion of Syria was Wavell's next move and the last of his strokes as Commander in the Middle East. Syria, with its natural appanage of Palestine, has, as was indicated in an earlier chapter, been recognized through the ages as a country of peculiar strategic value. Armies, from the Biblical Assyrian to the modern Australian, have battled there or made of it a corridor of passage. In olden days it was, however, shut in by the desert on the east, by the Sinai peninsula on the south, and by the Taurus and Ammanus mountains on the north, all of which features presented severe limitations to operations beyond its borders. It had then only one easy passage to the east, that by Aleppo and the valley of the Euphrates. To-day, the fact that mechanized forces can traverse the deserts without difficulty, makes of the country an admirable base for campaigns to the south and east. Moreover, railways pierce the mountains, and aircraft from a plenitude of aerodromes fly over them. Finally, it will be remembered how largely Alexandretta, which is geographically a Syrian port, bulked in the strategic discussions of the Great War.

The revolt in Iraq, the assistance lent by the Vichy government to Rashid Ali, both through the despatch of war material to that rebel and the loan of aerodromes to his German supporters, the arrival of numerous German 'tourists' in the

country, the possibility of a German movement through Turkey and the danger to Cyprus that would arise from a German occupation, decided the British Government to 'take the bull by the horns' and invade Syria.

On the 8th of June, Allied forces crossed the frontier in three groups :

*Eastern Column.*—5th Indian Brigade, a Field Regiment R.A., a squadron of the Royals, Trans-jordan Frontier Force elements, and the Free French under General Catroux and Colonel Collet.

*Central Column.*—25th Australian Brigade and Royal Fusiliers.

*Coastal Column.*—Supported by the fleet, 21st Australian Brigade and Cheshire Yeomanry.

At the same time a motorized column from Iraq, consisting of Household Cavalry, Wiltshire Yeomanry and Warwickshire Yeomanry, a Field Regiment R.A., a battalion of the Essex Regiment, and part of the Arab Legion, moved on Palmyra—Zenobia's ancient capital. Shortly afterwards, the 10th Indian Division, also from Iraq, moved towards Deir ez Zor, thence to strike at Aleppo.

At the start, progress seemed decidedly slow ; but, eventually, the campaign was conducted to a victorious conclusion in less than five weeks—a remarkable performance. No attempt will be made here to describe it in detail, but several points of interest will be noted.

The political aspects of the campaign had, of course, to be considered. Mr. Churchill, indeed, declared in the House that the military commanders on the spot were completely unfettered in this respect. Nevertheless, conditions were such that politics could not fail to play a prominent, perhaps an unduly prominent part.

In the first place, what could be more certain than that the Free French, who formed a large proportion of the invading army, wished, just as they did at Dakar, to deal tenderly with their compatriots? They had probably no wish to inflict either heavy casualties or a crushing defeat upon them. Their hope, and it was a natural one, was that many Vichy soldiers would join them. It is probable, therefore, that they themselves, gallant soldiers though they are, did not go all out and that their influence in this respect affected the whole operations.

War, however, is not an affair in which even superior forces can fight with the gloves on against ungloved adversaries. Gloves should be worn only at manœuvres. Lord Howe, when commanding British troops in the American War of Independence, is said to have imposed a severe handicap on his army through his sympathy for his opponents. How far a similar feeling slowed down our advance in Syria can, as yet, only be guessed, but its effect in that direction may have been considerable ; and the tardiness of our advance, seen against the background of a war in which nearly every campaign had been a *Blitzkrieg*, was disappointing and caused no little anxiety to our friends in Turkey, just as that country was becoming entangled in the German web. In any case sympathy was wasted, for the number of the enemy to join de Gaulle's army was miserably small. In fact, the presence of Free French troops actually embittered the hostile resistance.

The second outstanding political issue lay in the future government of Syria. The France of 1936 had made a treaty with Syria, promising to renounce her mandate over the country ; but, after raising

high expectations thereby, she had never ratified it. In the new situation which has arisen, we and the Free French with us have already promised Syria her independence. Such action, it was hoped, would bring the Arabs in on our side ; and it is urgent for us in our actions in the Middle East to have the Arab vote, not only in Damascus but in all Arab capitals. The Syrian Arab, however, in spite of this promise, of the liberal supplies that we brought to his starving children and of propaganda launched from our lorry-borne wireless sets, has remained apathetic. He had been bribed with German gold ; he had suffered in the past from broken treaties ; and, in any case, permeated as he was with enemy propaganda, he could see but little to choose between the pledges of the Axis powers and those of the Allies. He understands visible force and accepts its rulings ; but he has no personal interest in the war, and we are unlikely to find in him a devoted adherent. Thus, on both expectations—French desertion and Arab favour—there has been disappointment ; though that is not to say that our aims were wrong or that we should abandon them.

Moreover, the French soldiers, fighting in a strong and rugged country which they knew intimately, proved tough opponents. They numbered 35,000 men and were all veterans, the conscripts having long since been returned to France. Including mercenaries from many lands, they had formed the *élite* of Weygand's army which was itself the pick of the French armies. In gallant combat with a foe who was at once their ancient ally and their reluctant enemy, they have regained some of the honour lost by the French soldier in his battle with the Hun.

Making wide sweeps, they executed two daring counterstrokes with mechanized and motorized forces, one against Merj Ayoun and the other against El Kuneitra, towns lying on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon at important road-junctions on the lines of communication of our two left columns. El Kuneitra was quickly recaptured ; but Merj Ayoun was defended with resolution for several days and was evacuated by the enemy only after heavy fighting.

On the 21st of June, Damascus, the Arab capital, was occupied, and the enemy then took up positions mainly to the north and west, covering roads to Aleppo and Beirut respectively. The following day British troops from Iraq reached Palmyra. They found the town to be strongly fortified and did not succeed in capturing it until the 3rd of July. Thereafter, they split into three columns—one striking towards Homs, another towards Hama, and a third reaching to the south-west to gain touch with the Free French forces moving north from Damascus.

The most serious resistance offered in the campaign was that encountered by the Australians at Damour—a strongly fortified outwork of Beirut. Bombardments, on a scale faintly reminiscent of 1918, were required to enable infantry to advance through the skilfully organized tangle of weapon-pits, wire, and banana-groves that covered the town. It was an area in which there was full play for the initiative of platoon and section commanders ; and these junior leaders rose readily to the occasion of proving their mettle. Once Damour had fallen, Beirut lay at our mercy. Its harbour will make a useful base for light naval craft operating in the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean.



LIEUTENANT-GENERAL ALAN GORDON CUNNINGHAM



SOUTH AFRICAN TROOPS ON WHEELS

Just prior to the fall of the town, which is the focus of French rule in Syria, General Dentz, the Vichy High Commissioner, asked for an armistice. To that proposal we assented and put forward our terms, without, however, in any way relaxing our efforts to draw profit from the military advantages we had already gained and from Germany's pre-occupation with Russia. The drafting of the armistice terms must have been a task of peculiar difficulty in view of the exceedingly complicated and delicate political and religious situation in Syria, and it had no doubt been carefully elaborated beforehand, in consultation with de Gaulle. The main point of interest was that we insisted on the immediate surrender, with the honours of war, of the Vichy army, so that measures might be undertaken for organizing the defence of the country by the Allied forces against Axis attempts at invasion. General Catroux was appointed French High Commissioner.

We can, without any trumpeting, congratulate ourselves on having vastly improved our prestige and our strategic situation in the Middle East and in the eastern Mediterranean by the successful operations in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, on the borders of Syria we shall now be in much more real and closer touch with Turkey and will be able, should the need occur, to render her considerable assistance both in battle and with supplies. The Germans, for instance, advancing on Baku through Asia Minor, would feel very unhappy if attacked from the south by an Anglo-Turkish army.

The armistice was concluded in the hall in Acre dedicated to the memory of Sidney Smith, the Englishman who repulsed a former dictator's eastern invasion. *No more picturesque setting for*



the ceremony could be found than the ancient Crusader town, redolent, not only of the British defeat of Napoleon, but also of the association of Britain and France in ancient days when they strove in unison in a great religious cause. May we not hope that the re-establishment of close touch through the armistice may sweep away dissension and misunderstanding and lead to substantial reunion of the two nations in a cause as lofty as any pursued by our Cœur-de-Lion or French Godfrey de Bouillon ? May we not hope, too, by the terms of the armistice and by their implementation, to inspire the Arab world with renewed trust in our goodwill and in our sympathy with some form of Arab federation.

We may now turn for a moment to conditions in Turkey. That country, placed in a most difficult situation, had, in spite of her friendly feelings towards us, been clearly wavering for many weeks past in her resistance to Axis pressure. Nevertheless, it was a severe blow to Britain that she should have departed so far from her commitments as an ally to us as to sign a pact of non-aggression with our principal opponent. It is idle to say, as the Turks have said, that the new treaty will not conflict with the old. In fact the two are incompatible. And it is amazing that, with the object lesson afforded by almost every small state in Europe, Turkey should have taken this step which, if persisted in, must lead inevitably to the doom of her independence unless we can contrive to save her.

One of the most striking events in the Middle East has been the change of control there both in system and persons. An exchange has been effected between Cairo and Simla, between Generals Wavell

and Auchinleck. The reasons for relieving Wavell of his former command are obscure. Heavily handicapped by inferiority of numbers and equipment, he has conducted campaigns simultaneously on four fronts and has displayed by the just timing, strength and range of his strokes, not only ability of a high order, but, also and distinctly, the spark of genius. He has the confidence of his troops and the confidence of the nation. His known toughness of fibre and his transfer to another high command together preclude any doubt as to his health, though the appointment of a triumvirate to replace him is an indication that he must have been subjected to a colossal strain. There have, of course, been vicissitudes of fortune during his tour of command and, for such failures as have occurred, he must bear the responsibility, even though it was impossible for him to supervise in detail the vast theatre over which he held sway ; nor always to afford, from exiguous numbers, the support required at a critical moment by some distant and hard-pressed detachment. Possibly the change had its source in the strictures of members in the debate in the House on the 10th of June. Or, again, it may have been that Wavell has expressed himself dissatisfied with a system which denied him strategic control over all the fighting forces operating within the limits of his command. Whatever the cause, the public and, in particular, the army will be unhappy until the truth is revealed. Auchinleck is esteemed, in spheres where he is known, as highly as Wavell ; and no fear need be entertained as to his capacity for the task with which he has been entrusted. Nevertheless, the uninformed observer would have preferred that the two commanders concerned should have been retained in their former highly

responsible positions, for which they appeared to be admirably suited.

The other changes effected in control are all to the good. The question of provision is a matter of immense and growing size and intricacy in modern warfare. It is rendered peculiarly refractory in the Middle East by two factors. One is the scarcity and poverty, in comparison with continental communications, of the roads and railways which traverse the vast theatre of war ; and the other is that supply, instead of being effected as in time of peace, directly through the Mediterranean, converges on Egypt from east and south, from India, Malaya, Australasia, South Africa, Great Britain (by the Cape), and America. There is consequently a clear need for the appointment of a general of proved capacity to relieve the Commander-in-Chief as far as possible of the onerous duties connected with it.

Sir Richard Haining is not new to the country ; for, prior to the war, he held the command in Palestine. As Intendant-General, he will need to concern himself with supply from internal as well as external sources, to develop production in the vast territories under Auchinleck's control and to make full use of the equipment captured from the Italians. In the latter connection, the danger of a variety of calibres of weapons and of natures of ammunition has always been somewhat exaggerated in our army. There is far greater peril immanent in a scarcity of weapons and of equipment, or in the use of our exiguous shipping for the transport of munitions that should not be required if captured material were fully exploited. At least, all garrisons, all levies, and native allies should be equipped with French and

Italian armaments. The Cretans, for instance, should have been so armed for the defence of their island. And, preferably, the distribution should be much wider than that. The obstacles to such procedure are not serious, and any inconvenience they might entail would be well repaid. The German Army in Russia is followed by a special staff devoted to collecting, cataloguing and either re-conditioning and distributing or assigning to 'scrap' all captured material. Indeed, to make war support war has always been a high part of leadership.

If the conflict lasts long enough, we shall no doubt find the Government adopting in slow succession the various changes in system of control long urged upon them. The appointment of a supreme army-commander in the Middle East was one such step, and it was taken with surprising alacrity early in the war. Decentralization on the military side has now, after two years, been followed on the political and diplomatic side by the appointment in the same theatre of a representative of the War Cabinet, whose task, said Mr. Churchill, will be to relieve the military commanders, as far as possible, of a number of extraneous responsibilities with which they have hitherto been burdened and to settle promptly matters within the policy of the Government which involve several Home Ministries or local authorities. Mr. Oliver Lyttleton may be warmly welcomed to his new post. He will have in his hands all the threads of policy in the countries with which he is associated. In that sphere he will be able to give a speedy, ordered, and unified direction to political affairs and will ensure that policy and strategy go hand in hand.

## CHAPTER XVII

### CONCLUSION

HAVING EXPERIENCED MANY OF THE caprices of fortune and having survived a long period of comparative weakness, Wavell departed for India, leaving his Middle Eastern Command on a satisfactory footing. Abyssinia had been conquered and supply through the Red Sea thus assured. Syria had been invaded. On the western frontier of Egypt the Briton was again 'top-dog'; and large reinforcements of men and material were pouring into Suez.

His successor has at his disposal a well-equipped army, small, of course, in comparison with the millions grappling in Russia, but not less than 600,000 strong and composed, for the most part, of veteran warriors. He has vast areas to guard, indeed, but, with the elimination of Italian East Africa, is now, no doubt, possessed of a powerful central reserve with which to strike in any required direction.

Two possible theatres of action have been indicated for the employment of that reserve—first, Libya, with a view to ousting the Axis powers completely from North Africa; and, secondly, Turkey in Asia, where a stroke might have to be directed at the southern flank of an Italo-Bulgar-German army moving from the Bosphorus on Baku.

The choice between the two is very difficult for Auchinleck. Should he move the bulk of his army

towards Tripoli, he might have to recall it to deal with a successful German invasion of Turkey. On the other hand, to surrender the initiative because of a possible enemy stroke that might never materialize would be galling in the extreme and depressing to morale. The solution may lie, not in cautious waiting on events, but in bold action taken after a wise measurement of risks.

There is yet a third sphere of action conceivable—Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. And here we might find Wavell once more in the saddle. Iraq has, for convenience of reinforcement, been handed over to the control of India ; and Iran and Afghanistan, as battle-grounds, fall naturally to the same Command. These theatres might come into the picture should Hitler win his way to Baku and make, of that point, a spring-board for eastern adventure. We might then see yet another mammoth battle, the new one stretching from Alexandretta to the Khyber Pass, on a front transcending in length even that now aflame from the Arctic to the Black Sea. A motley crew of Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Rumanians, Bulgarians, might be marching from Constantinople on Delhi. Arrayed against them would be the forces of the Empire based on British sea-power operating from points—Alexandretta, Suez, Basra, Bandari-Shahpur, and Karachi—whence railways and roads would lead to the German flank. And, vast as is this imagined battle-front, it omits from contemplation prospective conflict in Far Eastern fields.

This is no idle dream, but a representation of a possible future which, if fulfilled, would be less strange than the quick capture of Norway or the

sudden collapse of France. As a turn of fate, it might entail long years of bitter struggle and make demands on us, far greater than any of our experience, for the development and full exploitation of every ounce of our fighting and productive capacity.

Even strengthened by the immense territorial gains that the capture of Baku would imply, and by the priceless value for future conquests of the oil obtained there, the German army would find an eastern march as difficult and hazardous as the alternative plan of invading Britain. Instead of the great advantage it possessed over us in Greece of secure and well-roaded communications—roughly 1,200 miles long as opposed to our 12,000 miles—it would connect with its base by an ever-lengthening chain stretching eventually to 4,000 miles, even more, in fact, if forced by the threat of our sea-power to take the road from Moscow to Termez instead of that through Iran. Supply by such a route would test to the utmost the administrative capacity even of the highly competent German staff. We, on the other hand, drawing our supplies by sea from the vast fields and factories of America and the Empire and, by virtue of our sea-power, being able to choose the point at which to strike, would have a strong strategic pull.

While these lines were taking galley proof form came the news of our invasion of Iran. German tourists and technicians had long been infiltrating in large numbers into that country. They were endeavouring to organize it against the Allies, and their presence there was a standing menace to the oilfields. We therefore demanded their expulsion and, as the Shah and his Government ignored the request, we decided to employ compulsion.



A SOLDIER OF KENYA LOOKS AT ABYSSINIA





REGULAR ETHIOPIAN PATRIOTS

British forces then invaded Iran in two groups—one from the south-west, near the principal oil-fields, and the other from the west, by Khaniquin and the 'Golden road to Samarkhand.' At the same time, a Russian army advanced from the north-west by Tiflis and Tabriz.

The invaders encountered no serious opposition; for, though the approaches to the great Iranian plateau are highly susceptible of defence, Persian soldiers and airmen possess neither the equipment nor the training for resisting modern armies.

As regards the British and Indian forces engaged, it is of interest that, though Lieut.-General Quinan commands in the field, Wavell, as Commander-in-Chief in India, is in general control and, on this occasion, of what is a truly Middle Eastern campaign. His knowledge of our Russian allies, of the Russian language, and of the Caucasus theatre may stand him in good stead in his new task.

A Persia in our occupation is of considerable strategic value. Instead of affording, as it would in hostile hands, a convenient enemy approach to India, it acts as a useful outpost to that country. Then, by means of the railway from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian, it enables us to furnish supplies to Russia, not easily and well indeed, but better than is possible elsewhere. Moreover, it safeguards one of our principal sources of oil, it should fortify the will of Turkey to resist aggression, and it may enable British, Russian and, possibly, Turkish forces to present a common front in the Caucasus should the Germans succeed in reaching that region in their advance on Baku.

It may be well, however, to sound a note of warning at this point, namely, that we must not

expect, until the Empire shall have developed greater power than it has at present available, to be able to garrison either Iraq or Iran in great strength. While in our possession these two countries are indeed valuable strategic assets, but they are not easily held against greatly superior force and it is important that any action we may take in them shall not weaken our key-position in Egypt. Fortunately, the present distribution of Commands exactly fits that requirement. Wavell, in India, can treat his troops in Iraq and Iran as fighting outposts and support or withdraw them as the situation may demand. Auchinleck will thus be enabled to concentrate on his main task of securing Alexandria and the Suez Canal, while holding his central reserve ready to strike north against Germans in Turkey, or west into Libya as conditions may require.

Here we may take leave of the campaigns in the Middle East and turn to the world conflict of which they form an important part. Whatever the shape that conflict may take, our prospects of success stand high provided we fulfil certain essential requirements. These lie outside the scope of this book and are only mentioned lest, owing to the lack of notice, the impression might be created that they are not considered of cardinal importance.

The first—a condition which needs no emphasis and which, happily, is being continually and everywhere implemented, is unity—unity in Britain, unity in the Empire. The second is that we must make up our minds to depend on ourselves alone. Let us welcome with gladness and gratitude any assistance lent by Russia or America ; but we must not allow it to interfere with our war-effort. To

relax in the smallest degree before final victory is won, might easily prove fatal both to us and to the cause for which we stand. The third point is that there must be a stern resolution on the part of each citizen of the Empire to give of his best in his own sphere, whether in fighting, in training, in production, or in personal and public economy. These are the three prime postulates of victory to which all—soldier or civilian, man or woman, young or old—can subscribe and contribute.

There are two other matters which cry out from the pages of this book. The one is the need for preparation. The failure to prepare has been paid for in wasteful bloodshed and in defeat that verged on disaster. By good fortune alone did we escape the worst ; for it was due, not to German mercy or to any merit of ours, but to a miscalculation by Hitler, that London was not laid in ashes as was Rotterdam. In every field, however, we suffered—and nowhere more so than in the Middle East—from lack of men and machines. It may seem idle to talk of preparation now, when the hour for it is long past. But it is well, in principle, to lay stress on the need so that we may combat what Mr. Churchill has called ‘ the confirmed unteachability of mankind,’ and thus prevent the nation from neglecting its defences and from lapsing once more into that way of sloth which, but for the grace of God, would have led us to perdition.

The last of the postulates of victory is the need for central military control. At present, the efforts of the fighting forces are co-ordinated, most ineffectively, by the War Cabinet. Mr. Churchill is, indeed, Minister of Defence and is in theory responsible for co-ordination ; but, without a ministry and a staff to support him and to set

the problem before him in every one of its aspects, he is utterly unequal, superman though he is, to the task.

A number of examples may be culled from events in the Middle East to show the urgent need of central control over the three separate and largely independent Services. A notable instance was that, in spite of the great results achieved by German dive-bombers and their tested value both in supporting an attack and in covering a retreat, no aircraft of this nature were assigned to the British army. The Air Ministry, looking at the matter from the parochial point of view of purely aerial attack and defence by the R.A.F., decided against their introduction. It was, indeed, by no means necessary to make dive-bombing squadrons a part of the army ; for, to allot large numbers of machines of any kind permanently either to the army or navy, is to deprive an air force of that flexibility which is one of its more valuable assets. But an impartial authority should have decreed, on the clear evidence available, that the necessary machines should be designed according to army requirements and placed under direct and unquestionable army command for training and operations and that, pending production of the new machines, makeshift aircraft should be employed. The same authority (and not the Air Ministry) should decree when these aircraft should be removed from army control in order, say, to assist the fleet or to attack enemy aerodromes.

Then, why was it that we were seven months in Crete without organizing the defence of our aerodromes there and why did we decide, to our heavy loss in warships and troops, to defend the island without aircraft ? Surely these mistakes were

due to a failure to co-ordinate the activities of the army and air force.

Again, how was it that the important aerodrome near Lake Habbaniya in Iraq was sited in a position where it offered the temptation of a rich and easy prize to rebellious elements in Baghdad? Did the Air Ministry consult the War Office, on whom the responsibility of its protection should lie, as to the possibility of its defence and the means of protecting it? If not, surely the incident indicates that there should be some over-riding authority to insist that full consideration be given to every aspect of such a problem.

On larger questions, in which more than one service is involved, such as anti-aircraft defence, the control of the Fleet Air Arm and the Coastal Command of the R.A.F., and the assignment of aircraft to the attack of distant objectives, when the army was fighting desperately for its existence, the rifts in opinion between the Air Ministry and the Admiralty, the Air Ministry and the War Office, have been notorious, and the dissensions borne of them have naturally percolated through all ranks of the Services.

Turning now to the enemy side, we find a totally different procedure. The Germans have long recognized the necessity for treating army, navy and air force as a single instrument. Many of their prospective military leaders were compelled to serve in the fleet and the *Luftwaffe*. They were not, as with us, just attached for short periods to a unit of another service as a mild tribute to the value of co-operation. Instead, they went right through the mill and occupied executive positions for as long as two years. Through this intimate connection, they developed the habit, which has proved of

immense worth, in training, in planning and in action, of thinking of every operation, whether by land, sea or air, as three-dimensional. The results have been plain for all to see. It is recognized as beyond dispute that the combination by the German High Command of the three Services for battle has contributed more than any other single factor to the achievement of their startling and colossal victories.

The only serious step which we took towards the establishment of the mental habit of treating the three Services as one was the institution, some years before the war, of a year's course in inter-service co-operation at the Imperial Defence College. The training afforded there, slight though it was in comparison with that exacted by our principal opponent from his potential leaders, would enable us to draw from its graduates the nucleus of that Combined Staff which is an essential feature of a Ministry of Defence.

Other methods of effecting co-ordination have, indeed, been suggested ; but the proposals made usually err in entrusting planning to persons who are representatives and therefore proponents of their respective Services. As such, they are bound, as the age-long record of such planning committees shows, to lead, through wrangling and compromise, to darkening of counsel and delay in execution. Whatever the planning authority, it must be as impartial as is humanly possible.

Curiously enough in recent discussions in Parliament, hardly a speaker but traced our defeats to lack of effective co-ordination ; yet not one suggested the obvious remedy. Though many members paid lip-service to the idea in pre-war days, the subject of a Ministry of Defence is, for some obscure

reason, now taboo. Possibly the catchword as to the danger of swopping horses when crossing a stream, is decisive of the issue ; but who, in such circumstances, would not exchange a faltering for a sound steed ?

Much has been said in Parliament upon the urgency of the introduction of a real Ministry of Supply or Production, which would make provision not only for the army but for all three Services. There is, of course, much to be said for such a scheme, but it would be useless to bring it into being until a Ministry of Defence had been instituted. The question of priorities in supply, if it is to be related to the general strategy of the war, can be adequately handled only on the advice of an expert and impartial Combined Staff.

To obtain an accurate representation of the dangers of divided control, we should picture Waterloo without Wellington. Three generals, one of artillery, one of cavalry, one of infantry, are trying to reach an agreed plan. Each is thinking mainly, not of a broad scheme embracing the whole battlefield and developing, through the combination of all arms, the full striking power of the available forces, but rather of the particular needs and traditional tactics of his own arm. Wood, Paget and Picton. They would hardly be human were they not to demand pride of place for their respective followings. Meanwhile, unhampered by councils of war and the needs for compromise, Napoleon is marching. Like a thunderbolt he breaks in upon the deliberations of his opponents, and sweeps their leaderless army from the field.

Curiously enough, we pride ourselves on teamwork within our particular sphere ; yet, perhaps for that very reason, the spheres themselves do not



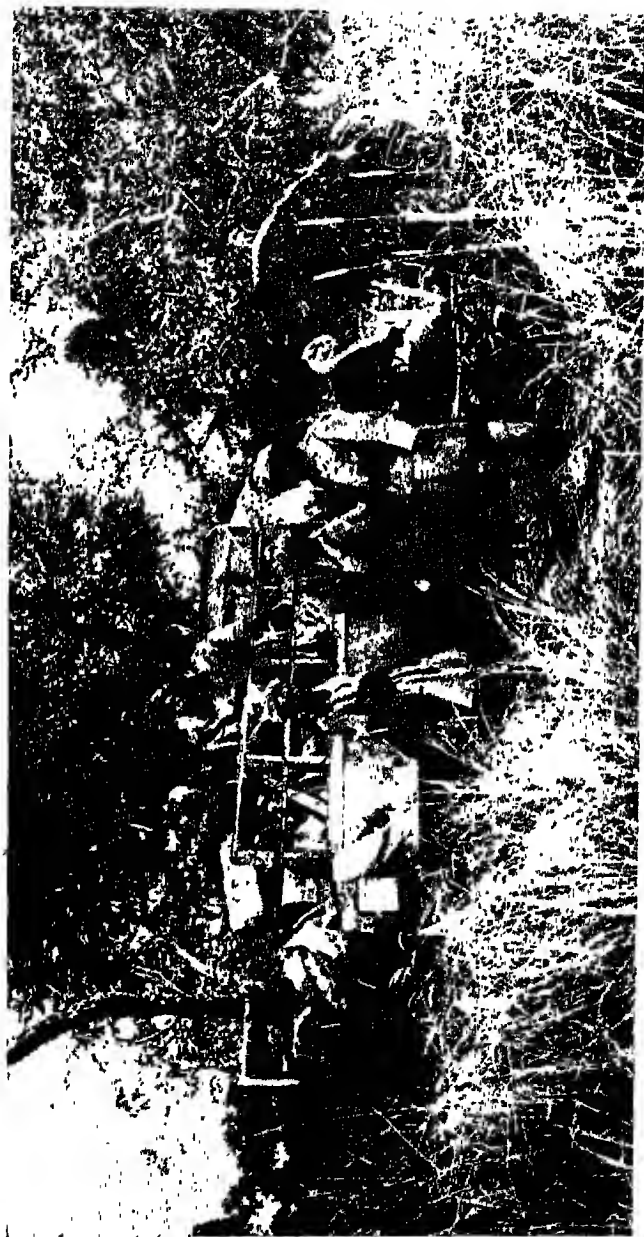
easily combine. The team-work in Libya of Wavell, Cunningham, and Longmore was fine indeed ; but it stands out not only by its brilliance, but by its rarity. We must, therefore, trust not to co-operation, but to co-ordination. The individual performances of the fighting services are superb ; but their devotion, their courage and their skill must largely run to waste unless effectively controlled and directed to the common end.

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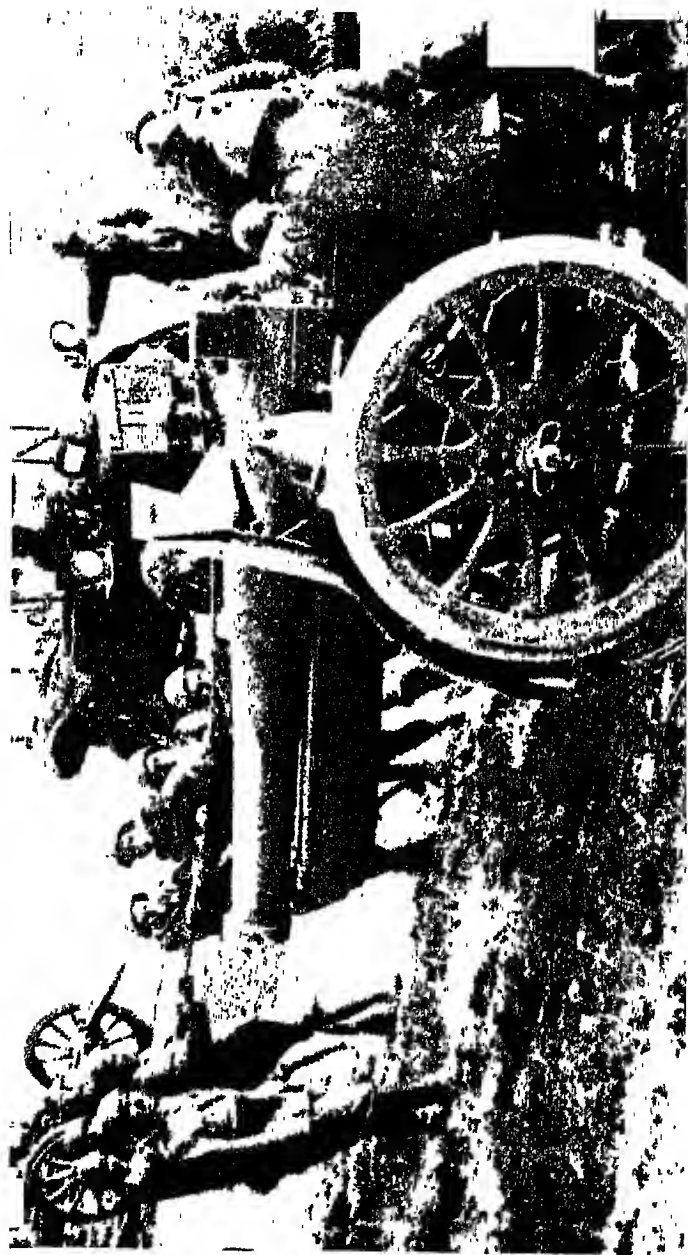
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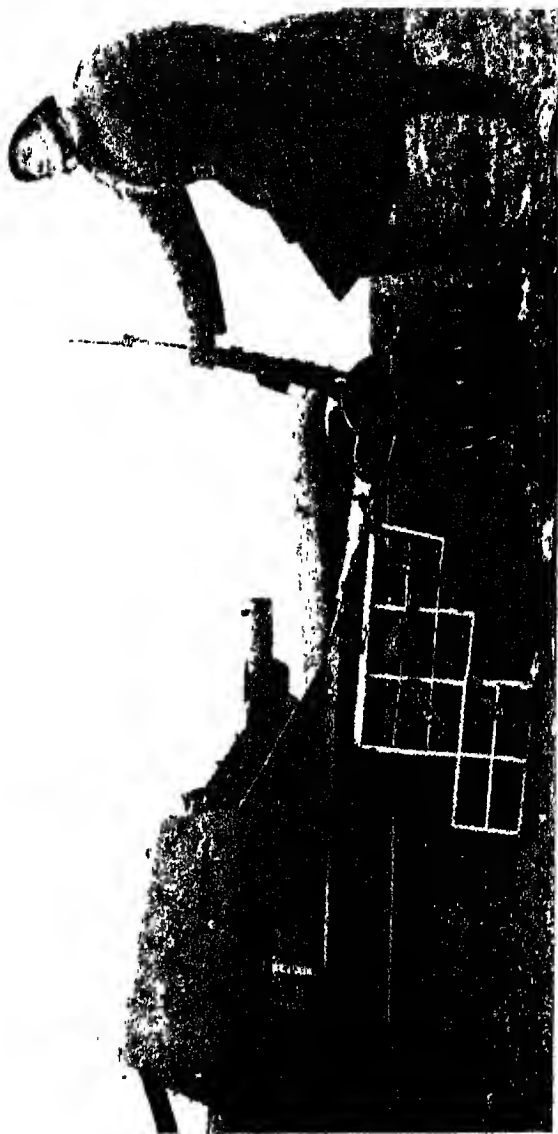
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A LORRY BLAZES A TRAIL THROUGH THE JUNGLE



GREEK GUNNERS MANHANDLING HEAVY HOWITZER



A GREEK GUARDS HIS CAPTURE



NAPIER'S TROOPS PASSING AMBA ALAGI

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